

Brown Eyes

Christy T

Star Wars

Complete



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This story was first published on October 12th, 2009, and was last updated on March 31st, 2011.

FicLab ID: SBRuA8lQ/ltytm0ka/5zf00C5S

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Summary

title Brown Eyes
author Christy T
source <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/5438793/>
published October 12th, 2009
updated March 31st, 2011
words 92,403
chapters 25
status Complete
rating Fiction T
tags Complete, Darth Vader, Drama, Fanfiction, Movies, Padmé Amidala, Romance, Star Wars

Description:

"Let's pretend," she said suddenly. "Let's pretend that for one night, for one moment, neither of us is who we are. Let's say...I'm a daring smuggler off the southern rim, and you..." She looked at him. "Who will you be?" AU V/P. NOW COMPLETE with epilogue.

1. Brown Eyes

Brown Eyes

By **Serena**

A/N: I had a dream about Vader and Padme the other night, so it inspired me to write a short fic about them. Keep in mind that this is AU.

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Darth Vader was on the prowl tonight.

Although this was a supposedly social gathering, he and many others knew better. Dignitaries, senators, various military personnel, and anyone who was anyone was attending the Emperor's Annual Unification Ball, held in honor of the day of the creation of the Empire, for some, it was more than simply a time to talk and dance. It was more than a social event.

For Lord Darth Vader, it was a hunt. A hunting of several officials who weren't exactly who they claimed to be. Several officials who possibly, most likely had ties to certain rebellious organizations.

All of those tied directly into the underground resistance movement, the Rebel Alliance.

A list of names denoted the likely traitors to the Empire, a list that Vader kept securely in his belt compartment. He'd been running over the list for the past few days, analyzing each suspect. Most of them hadn't come as a surprise. They'd been part of the two thousand that had tried to stop the former Chancellor from gaining more power.

He prowled the room, cloak sweeping behind him, the sound of his unnatural breathing amplified in the crowded grand hall. People avoided him like they avoided a carnivorous predator, doubling their efforts to stay out of his way. Of course, he didn't care one way or the other — among the simpering politicians, nervous or overconfident military officers, stiff, supreme Grand Moffs, and of course, the seductive palace girls, he honestly didn't care if any of them lived or died. They were insignificant in the grand scheme of things. They had their uses... well, some of them, anyway.

His first target: Fang Zar. The old man had long been a member of the Delegation of Two Thousand and a persistent irritant in the Senate. It had been difficult to trace any connections directly to any blatant traitorous activity, but the Emperor had recently decided that the Delegation would be declared traitors to the Empire. Vader had not been displeased.

He spotted the old man talking with the beautiful young Chandrilian senator Mon Mothma, another suspected Rebellion aide. When Zar saw him, he swallowed, and his eyes widened.

Vader took in the man's fearful emotions as he slowed his pace and drew to a halt in front of them. Zar swallowed again and nodded shakily. Mon Mothma, to her credit, continued to look nonchalant and held that typical "Senator" expression Vader hated so much.

"Lord Vader," she said respectfully, folding her hands together. "May I help you?"

"Perhaps," Vader said icily. "I understand you and Zar have just returned from a meeting on Alderaan."

Mothma didn't move or show any emotion. Zar, however, paled. That meeting, Vader knew, was supposed to have been a secret. "Indeed. A meeting of old friends," Mothma informed him. "Our good friend, Senator Organa, recently lost his sister to a foreign illness. As his friends, we were of course there to comfort him."

"Indeed," said Vader darkly.

"What, exactly, are you implying?" Zar demanded, trembling even further.

"I am implying nothing," Vader snapped. "I merely came to inform you that the Emperor wishes to speak with each of you. Personally. I would advise you to be careful of your... *friends*." And with that chilling warning, he turned around and strode away, leaving the two Senators to dread the coming days.

Vader felt even more satisfied after he had delivered similar warnings to the others on the list. The last he met with was his least favorite: Bana Breemu. The woman stared up coyly at him through thick (probably fake) eyelashes.

"I don't know what you are talking of, My Lord," she purred. Her slinky satin dress shone gold in the light. But instead of looking elegant, the ensemble was cheap and unattractive.

"You will," he said shortly, storming away from her outstretched, clawed hands. Enough of her. He decided to make his way around the halls, keep an eye on the suspects, and slowly paced the grand hall and adjoining ballrooms.

While passing through a quieter connecting corridor, he moved past an open doorway. Normally, he would have not even bothered to look into the doorway, but something caught his senses.

It was so... refreshing. So fragrant. Like summer lilies in a dewy field at dawn. Vader halted. Glanced against his better judgment into the doorway. And simply stared at the vision before him.

An angel.

She was standing, her back to him, some paces away on a balcony overlooking the city. Her sleek, backless dress trailed down to her feet and billowed out in shades of silver and white behind her with the wind. He watched, entranced, as she reached up to her elegantly coiffed hairstyle, pulled at the pins with delicate fingers, and yanked the hair free. It tumbled down in long, luxurious, silken curls down her back, fluttering out in the breeze.

Vader's breath grew abruptly ragged. He swallowed and tried to control his furiously beating heart. He wanted to look away. He *had* to look away. She was just a girl... no. A woman. He hadn't even seen her face.

Against his better judgment, his master's teachings, and everything in him, he took a step closer, up to the doorway. But his breathing — his cursed breathing — alerted the angel to his presence.

She stiffened, turned sharply to face him.

Vader sucked in a breath.

Those eyes. Those brown eyes.

Brown eyes were by no means an unusual color for human females, but *her* eyes...

A brilliant mix of chestnut, hazel, amber, and chocolate... mixed with an intense blaze of passion, determination, and shining light.

They were the most incredible eyes he'd ever seen.

Her lips parted as she faced him — in shock, perhaps — but to his astonishment, he detected no fear in those brown eyes. Surprise... maybe. But an even more determined light shone there.

Then, his world turned upside down when she said: "Hello."

Not "Lord Vader!" or 'How do you do, My Lord?' No preening or false pretense, no overly exaggerated pleasantries. Just a simple, plain, "hello."

He'd never heard anything so refreshing in his life.

"Hello," he greeted in his deep timbre.

There was a small silence between them until she looked away from him and up to the stars. Her eyes glittered, and a small, dreamy smile appeared on her face. "They're beautiful, aren't they? Like crystal lights. Or wishes of fire."

Crystal lights? Wishes of fire? Who was this woman?

"I hardly know," he said, surprised. He took another step towards her. Then another. He was now on the balcony, but only a few feet away from the doorway. He wasn't sure whether to leave or... or stay.

"Let's pretend," she said suddenly. "Let's pretend that for one night, for one moment, neither of us is who we are. Let's say..." She turned again and leaned back on the railing. "I'm a daring smuggler off the southern rim, and you..." She looked at him. "Who are you going to be?"

He didn't know what to say, just stared at her. "I..." He halted, uncertain for the first time in his life.

Her eyes glittered in amusement. He should have been annoyed, irritated, furious even, but he was too distracted by the way the lights from the stars and city glistened in her eyes.

"All right," she said with a smile. "I'll make something up. You're... a pilot."

"That isn't very interesting," he said before he could stop himself.

She grinned. "Fine. A racer pilot. One of the best. You've just won the Metellos World Trophy, but you want more gritty races. Like in the outer rim. That's how we met."

He folded his arms over his chest. "Indeed." Although it came out in a cynical tone, he couldn't help but be intrigued. She was young... under twenty-five, most likely. Not too much younger than he.

But she didn't look taken aback or deterred by his tone, just nodded. "Yes. Let's say... you needed a certain part for your ship. But it wasn't legal. So you had me smuggle in the part and agreed to give me a share of the winnings."

"I highly doubt I would hire a smuggler for an illegal ship part."

She laughed, and curls fell into her eyes. She tossed her head to shake them away and pushed herself off the stone wall, taking a step towards him. He froze, unable to move, think, plan... he could only *feel*.

"But that's why," she said playfully, "it's called *pretending*."

His breath was the only sound for a second. Then, he said grudgingly: "Very well." His arms fell to his sides. "So... if we met in the outer rim, how did we end up here?"

What was he doing? He wasn't actually... *playing* her little game, was he? Lord Darth Vader of the Sith, second in the entire galaxy *only* to the Emperor himself, playing a *pretend game* with some *girl*.

Woman.

No. *Angel.*

The angel with brown eyes.

This was ridiculous.

But he couldn't tear himself away.

"Good question!" she said. "Perhaps we joined forces because you won so far above everyone else that you decided to keep me as a personal smuggler to help you if you ever needed a certain part. Or maybe we went our separate ways and just happened to be at the same place at the same time."

"Destiny?" Vader said wryly.

She grinned again. "Destiny. You don't believe in it?"

"Perhaps."

"But, of course," she added, "If I were a daring smuggler, I probably wouldn't believe in all that hokey destiny stuff. But if you were a brave, undefeated pilot known around the galaxy, you probably would, and maybe you'd try to convince me."

"Why do I have the feeling that it would be difficult to change your mind about anything?" he said in sudden dry amusement. He couldn't believe it. He was actually bantering with her. And he still didn't know her name.

Not that it mattered.

She laughed again and said sheepishly: “It’s one of my worst faults, I’m afraid. Stubbornness and I go together like sun and earth. Can’t have one without the other.”

“I’ve been told something similar,” he admitted.

She tilted her head to one side and regarded him with a more serious, thoughtful expression. “Perhaps the smuggler and the pilot are more alike than one would think.”

“I doubt that,” he said, retreating somewhat into his familiar dark shell.

She just gazed at him, still unafraid of his coldness. “Let’s say,” the brown-eyed woman said softly, “that the pilot and the daring smuggler were so different that no one and nothing could change them. What was the one thing that kept bringing them together?”

“I don’t know,” he said coldly.

She smiled gently, her brown eyes warm. “Destiny.”

The two regarded each other for another moment of silence, until he said in a more quiet voice, as quiet as his could get: “It’s only pretending.”

She nodded slowly. “Only pretending.” To his unexpected dismay, she moved to leave, brushing past him. Her scent invaded his senses.

Before he realized what he was doing, he turned and reached for her. “Wait.” His giant gloved hand touched her bare shoulder.

She stopped, dead still, and tilted her head towards his direction, but not fully, so she still wasn’t looking at him. Uncharacteristically uncertain, he pulled away regrettably.

But why was he uncertain? He was Lord Darth Vader. High Commander of the Empire. He could do anything he wanted, say anything he wanted, and there was no one, besides the Emperor, who could say anything about it.

So why did he hesitate now, in front of this slip of a girl?

She didn’t speak, drifted away from him. But when she reached the doorway, she turned around and faced him. “See you ’round, pilot,” she said with a sudden mischievous gleam in her eyes. Before he could reply, she slipped away and disappeared around the corner.

Vader stood there for a long time, wondering if he’d imagined the whole thing. He shook his head, clearing his mind of wayward thoughts, and decided to never think of her again. He had a mission to accomplish. His master would want to know his progress. But for some reason, his hunting senses were more reluctant as he returned to the grand ballroom.

His masked gaze swept over the room’s hundreds, maybe even thousands of occupants, irritated and restless. He continued pacing throughout the room, more unfocused than before, and more agitated.

Until he caught a flash of silver and white out of the corner of his eye, far across the room. Instinctively he turned, his distracted gaze now sharp and searching for a particular person. He moved through the crowd towards the spot where he’d seen the familiar gauzy fabric. But when he reached the spot, she was not there. Taller than many of the humanoids there, he looked around to see where she’d gone. He almost missed her — but when he caught another

flash of silver, he found her talking with... with, oh, Force — Bail Organa and Mon Mothma. Two of the most suspected Rebel sympathizers, most likely connected with the Alliance as well.

But that didn't stop him. Maybe she and stubbornness went together like sun and earth, but he and she were as different as day and night, sun and rain. And even more different, if she were connected with suspected Rebels.

But he continued on the same. His hunting instincts had returned, even more vibrant and purposeful... but in an entirely different way. He needed to find her. He needed to see her.

He needed *her*.

When Mon Mothma and Organa saw him coming, they stiffened simultaneously and started murmuring in lower voices to the angel, who was, for the most part, facing away from him. As he approached them, she turned to face him. She looked surprised for a split second but quickly covered that surprise.

"Lord Vader," Organa said stiffly, "what a pleasure... again. May I introduce Senator Padme Amidala of Naboo?"

Vader didn't even look at him. She wore an insufferable "Senator" mask and gazed up at him calmly, the picture of elegance. Her wild, untamed locks were smoothed back in that detailed hairdo.

But her eyes... those brown eyes were glittering.

She reached out a hand, and Vader bent over it, internally savoring the feel of her small, light hand in his, even if he couldn't actually feel her skin. He imagined it would be smoother than he anticipated.

"Good evening," he rumbled, and added in a much lower voice, "Smuggler."

Neither Bail nor Mon Mothma understood why in the Emperor's name Vader called her that... or why Padme's eyes were shining.

The End... Maybe.

OK, I know they were a little OOC. You probably think that she would've been much more hostile towards him — after all, he IS Darth Vader. But I'm making her character a little different in this... she's determined, headstrong still, but a little more lively and daydreamy, I guess you could say. Starry-eyed. She's not there to fight. And she saw an opportunity to maybe find out more about the man behind the mask. :)

I'm not sure if this is going to continue... depends, I suppose. It really can be a oneshot.

— **Serena**

2. Foolish Child

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: I got so many encouraging responses that I decided, against my initial thoughts, to continue this story. This will actually combine with another story idea I've been wanting to write. Man. You plot bunnies are ripping me to shreds.

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Two — Foolish Child

Padme Amidala was no fool.

She'd known since the beginning that her career was, for the most part, a hopeless case. The Senate would most likely be dissolved in several years, if not sooner. She could do nothing as a Senator in any case.

But that didn't stop her from trying. That didn't stop her from believing.

While some would call her naive, she preferred the term "hopeful." She hadn't given up hope yet that the Empire could be returned to the Republic it was before. Granted, she'd been only elected as Senator four months ago, and the Empire had been put into place five years ago, but she still clung to that strong belief in people. That they would do the right thing.

Well, maybe the Emperor was one of those who wouldn't. The man was pure evil, she had to admit. Still, she'd been taught from a young age that people always deserved a second chance. Did that include the Emperor? Maybe. But she also believed that people who did wrong needed to be brought to justice, and he was certainly no exception.

Her close friends and mentors Bail Organa and Mon Mothma had been guiding her into her new role as a Senator. But she'd also suspected that their motive wasn't entirely for her benefit alone. She'd seen them talk in hushed voices, murmurs of a new underground organization. The Rebel Alliance had only been whispered rumors, but everyone knew something was coming. Something big that would potentially throw the newly established Empire off-kilter.

Neither of them had specifically said anything to her about the subject directly, but Bail and Mon underestimated Padme's discernment. It was frustrating at times. They treated her like a child, fondly, but chidingly, and many times with rebuke or patronization.

Like now.

“Padme, my dear,” said Bail, bringing her out of her thoughts. “Are you listening?”

Padme blinked and looked up at him. “Oh, I’m sorry, Senator Organa. I was just thinking of something else.”

Bail smiled in a rather condescending way and patted her hand. “I don’t believe you’ll ever truly grow up, Padme,” he said in a fond way. “That starry-eyed daydreaming is still there, I see.”

Padme stiffened. That was insulting. “I’m twenty-four years old, Senator Organa,” she said. “I’m not a child. I may not be as wise of the world as you are, but that doesn’t mean I’m completely naïve. I know what the Empire is, and I knew when I took this job that the Senate probably won’t outlast the year. But that doesn’t mean I’m just going to give up.”

“Of course not,” Mon put in with a reassuring smile. “That’s not what Bail’s saying, Padme. We’re just... afraid that you might not know everything you’re getting into.”

“How so?” Padme demanded.

“Well... take Lord Vader, for example,” Mon said. “He has been hunting down opposition since the beginning. He all but exterminated the Jedi Order. He will kill anyone if he so feels like it. And you... well, the way you acted around him the other night...”

Padme frowned. “I know what he is, Senator Mothma. But that doesn’t mean I can’t be polite to the man. I was raised to treat everyone with respect.”

Everyone. Including the man in black himself: Darth Vader. The second most feared man in the galaxy. Strong, intimidating, and gifted with special powers like the Jedi. He could choke a man with a thought, block blaster shots with a hand. Everyone knew when he was coming by the sound of his harsh, unnatural breathing.

It was what had given him away to her.

Padme found herself smiling as she remembered that night. She didn’t know what had given her the boldness to address him so informally, or what had possessed her to start blabbering on about pretending and smugglers and pilots.

But oddly enough, she’d ended up enjoying the conversation. And she had the strangest feeling that he had, too. After all, he’d tried to stop her when she’d attempted to leave. The feeling of his gloved hand — a hand that had killed many — touching her bare shoulder with the lightness of a feather. Like she was the most delicate thing in the world.

And then... he had purposefully looked for her. And when he’d found her, he’d called her in an almost *playful* voice by the pretend title she’d given herself.

Smuggler.

She honestly didn’t know what to make of him now. Was it a trick? A device to get her onto the side of the Empire? Or maybe... a more personal goal... perhaps for unsavory purposes? Or had it been strangely sincere?

She didn't know. What she did know was that she really had no idea who Darth Vader was. Or why he'd treated her the way he had.

But she liked puzzles and mysteries; and whereas most people wouldn't go near the dark lord, she wanted to find out more about him. She wanted to discover the real man behind the mask.

Glancing at Bail and Mon, she bit her lip to keep from smiling. If she told them what she was thinking now, she'd be sure they would think her touched in the head, or just plain insane. She could just picture the conversation now:

"Oh, Bail! Mon! I want to get to know Darth Vader."

"Darth Vader! Padme, you can't be serious!"

"Oh, yes! You see, I met him the other night at the ball, and we had a nice chat."

"A *nice chat*?!"

Yes, she thought dryly, *that wouldn't go over very well.*

"I just..." she said. "I just don't think that we should give up on anyone."

Bail said gently, "But my dear, not everyone is as honest and kind as you are. Your blind trust will get you into trouble one day if you're not careful."

"I'm *not* blindly trusting," Padme argued. "I just don't like to see the worst in everyone as soon as I meet them. I don't want to judge before I've actually gotten to know them."

"But based on peoples' actions, one can generally get a good idea of what a person's character is like, Padme," Mon Mothma broke in. "Like Lord Vader. He's murdered so many people. Is that really the kind of man who could change?" She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"That's a little premature, don't you think?" Padme said. "And just who is Darth Vader? Where did he come from? Did something happen in his past to make him the way he was?"

"Some people are just plain evil, Padme," Bail said firmly. "And there's no way around it."

Padme sighed and shook her head, staring out the window. "That's not always the whole story," she said. "Some people are just misunderstood."

Mon laughed gently. "Oh, Padme, you never see the bad in anyone, do you?" Her expression was almost sad, as if Padme were a hopeless case. "You have so much to learn."

Well, thank you very much, Padme thought angrily.

The doorbell rang, and Bail's droid went to the door. "It is Senator Bana Breemu, sir," the droid announced.

"Ah, excellent. Invite her in," Bail said. He rose to his feet to greet the new arrival and glanced back at Padme. "Now, here is another excellent example to help you," he said. "A first-class Senator."

"More like a first-class skank," Padme muttered under her breath.

Bail frowned and said: "Excuse me?"

Padme looked away innocently, taking a sip of her tea. Mon shot her a warning look and gracefully rose to her feet and turned to face Bana as she glided into the room, wearing a thin, silky-blue wrap around cloth that left much of her stomach bare, and covering, for the most part, only the bare minimum of her chest.

First-class? Really, Bail?

But Bail was one of her oldest advisors. She couldn't just say that. She set down her tea cup and smoothed out her silver skirt. Her dress was modest, anyway. Light silver blouse with poet sleeves and a dark navy velvet vest adorned with beautiful beadwork on the front closure. She wore her hair up today in two twisted buns, although her headpiece was light and simple. She'd brought her navy velvet cloak as well, but she didn't need that now.

Needless to say, she felt like throwing her cloak at Breemu... well, if she weren't that her cloak would be sullied by Breemu's clawlike fingers. She then wondered if Bail had an extra blanket lying around somewhere...

"Ah, Senator Breemu," Bail said, smiling broadly as he took Bana's pale hand and kissed it. "An honor, as always. You look lovely."

"Thank you, Senator Organa," Bana giggled. "Please, we've known each other too long for such formality."

Bail grinned. "Of course, Bana." He took her hand and led her into the room. Mon smiled politely and greeted Bana, who returned the gesture half-heartedly. Then, Bana's eyes fell to Padme. "Oh, yes, I'm not sure if you have ever met newly elected Senator Padme Amidala. She's from the beautiful planet of Naboo."

"Pleasure," said Bana, obviously not pleased at all. She was looking at Padme as someone to rip apart rather than befriend.

Padme felt like rolling her eyes, but instead, she smiled sweetly and held out a hand. "Delighted to meet you," she said warmly. "Bail's said so much about you." When Bana gingerly took her hand, she shook it heartily. As soon as she let go, Bana pulled her hand back and delicately wiped it on the side of her skirt.

Padme stifled a laugh and sat down, taking her teacup again. "Please, you must sit by me, Senator," she urged the woman, patting the seat next to her on the couch. "I am so thrilled to be able to finally talk with you."

"Indeed." Bana sniffed and grudgingly took a seat next to Padme.

"Oh, hear, let me get you a cup of tea." Padme placed her tea cup on the tray next to her and grabbed an extra cup of tea. But as she brought the tea around to Bana, she let a drop fall on her lap. She gasped and jerked the tea cup, causing most of the hot water to spill right onto Bana.

Bana shrieked and jumped out of her seat, screaming: "You clumsy oaf! Look what you've done!" The front of her "shirt" and most of her skirt was covered in tea-colored stains.

"Oh, I am so sorry," Padme breathed. It was difficult to hold back the laughter, but she managed to do so, instead watching as Bail hurried to help Bana. Mon looked somewhat

unimpressed but also aided Breemu.

“If *she* is here,” Bana wailed, pointing to Padme, “Then I will *not be here!* She is a disgrace to the Senate!”

“Now, Bana,” Mon said sternly, “that is hardly a way to talk about Padme. It was an accident.”

Of course. An accident.

“No, it’s all right, Mon,” Padme said, gathering her cloak in her hands. Getting to her feet she added, ‘I have to leave, anyway. It’s getting late.’ In reality it was only four in the afternoon, and the sun was just beginning to set, but she didn’t care. “I’ll speak with you later on that bill. Bail, Mon. Senator Breemu. I’m sorry, again.” She flashed Bana a smile and walked out of the room.

That was fun.

She pulled on her cloak and pulled up the hood, letting out a sigh as she leaned against the back of the lift. She wished Bail and Mon wouldn’t treat her like a child. It seemed everyone from her parents to her older sister and now her advisors and supposed friends thought she hadn’t grown up yet and never would.

Padme stepped out of the lift and signaled for her ride to wait for her. She needed to clear her head. She needed a walk.

Folding her arms over her chest, she stared down at the sidewalk, ignoring the people that passed by her. The air felt good on her face and hands, but inwardly, she was distressed.

Was she still acting like a child? Looking up at the stars every night and wishing on them? Making up stories about smugglers and pilots with someone she’d never even met, someone who just happened to be Lord Darth Vader?

She walked onto the Senate grounds and strolled around the building to a secluded terrace. No one was around this time of day — the senators would either be at home or in the middle of a meeting. No new meetings were called after four, and so, Padme found herself alone on the stone terrace this evening. But she didn’t mind. She preferred it, actually.

She stared up at the sunset for a while until she turned to continue her walk. But completely lost in thought, she didn’t hear someone drawing nearer until she looked up and saw a familiar figure striding across the terrace. He wasn’t paying any attention to her, so she assumed he didn’t know it was her, or he just didn’t care. She watched him until he seemed to sense that someone was watching him. He paused, and his helmet swiveled in her direction.

And for the second time, she gazed at him, unafraid.

“Hello, pilot,” she said.

TBC.

All right, Bail and Mon were probably a little OOC for you, but let me repeat this: IT IS AU. The characters are not going to be exactly like they are in the movie. Different circumstances, different characteristics. Padme, as you can obviously see, is a little more day-dreamy and not as hardened as the original Padme because she wasn't the queen. She hasn't had that many responsibilities yet. She's still got to grow up a bit, even if she doesn't want to admit it. And Vader... well, you'll see about Vader.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

3. Guilty Pleasure

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Man, you guys are awesome. :) I'm so thrilled you like this AU version! I was a little hesitant to write the story at first because I was afraid people would blast me for making Padme and even Vader OOC, but I'm so happy you guys like the way they're portrayed. I just thought it would be neat to shake things up a bit. I LOVE what ifs? and AUs, so I'm so excited to continue. This chapter, and probably future chapters, are inspired by the song "Sweet Dreams" by Beyonce. Love that song.

And for anyone who's a fan of my fic "Irony", it sometimes takes a while for my humor muse to get cracking, but don't worry, I'm already working on the chapter... in my mind. :)

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Three: Guilty Pleasure

Vader hated politicians. Scheming, filthy, corrupted, slimy weasels with no thought of anyone else but themselves. He was leaving a Senate committee that was trying to decide how much more to tax the Coruscanti citizens and how much more of a raise they could give themselves. Of course, then the Moff's got involved.

Vader shook his head as he stormed out of the Senate hall and entered the pavilion in the back of the building.

Disgusting worms, all of them, he thought.

But as he strode out onto the stone patio near the fountain, he felt two eyes watching him. He halted, catching a disturbingly fragrant scent, and turned his head to look at the cloaked person he had not noticed before.

"Hello, pilot," said a low, soft, warm voice.

Well... perhaps not *all* of them were disgusting worms. There might be... *one* exception.

Immediately, his senses went on overload. *Her*. It was *her*. The angel. He hadn't seen her since the ball, but try as he might, he couldn't stop thinking about her. About her scent... her smile... her laugh... her eyes. The way they glittered in the starlight.

The image of her glossy curls tumbling down her creamy, smooth back sent chills up his spine and heat to his face. He'd never seen anything so utterly perfect in his life. That fact alone was disturbing itself. After that night, he'd been distracted, restless. He couldn't get her out of his head.

And now, here she was. Addressing him by his pretend name, unafraid. Those brown eyes glittered warmly from underneath her navy velvet hood.

For the second time since he met her, for the second time in his life, he felt his breath catch. He stared at her for a moment through his mask, breathing more hoarsely and rapidly than before. He didn't know what to say for a moment.

Finally he managed to reply: "Senator Amidala."

Her eyes dulled slightly, much to his despair. "Lord Vader," she returned quietly with a nod.

No — he didn't mean... No. He had to stop this. He couldn't feel this way.

Stiffly he said: "I didn't see anyone else here. Have I intruded?"

"It doesn't matter. You're Darth Vader. You can go anywhere you please."

Her sudden change to "senator" mode frustrated him beyond belief. But he should want this — he shouldn't care what she thought of him or what she was feeling. He should be happy to bring things to a professional level, one where she respected him... feared him.

He let out a long breath. "I wouldn't wish to invade your privacy, Senator," he replied.

A sudden light came back to her eyes, and she smiled, to his astonishment. "You haven't. We're old friends, remember?" She took a step towards the fountain. "Partners."

"Ah, yes," Vader said. "And I believe you still have one engine coil to deliver to me."

Her eyes sparkled, and she laughed in delight. Vader's heart beat faster as she dipped her hand in the fountain water and watched as it ran through her fingers and back into the pool. She looked back at him as he watched her in fascination and said: "That's right. I forgot. I'll have to bring it to you before the next big race."

"Indeed." He slowly drew towards her as she ran a hand through the water distractedly. But she didn't pull away like anyone else would have. She didn't even flinch as he came closer.

He felt the sudden urge to pull back her hood and reveal her stunning, glowing face. But then she looked up at him as he now stood beside her, and her expression was more serious.

"I prefer not to be a Senator right now," she admitted, glancing back down to the fountain pool. "I've spent all day going over legislation and signing petitions and making motions and..." She hesitated.

"And?" he pressed, folding his arms over his chest.

"And," she sighed, "I don't know if I'm ready."

"For what?"

"This job. I mean, it's a good job," she added, glancing up at him. "Trying to change things, do good in the galaxy. Try to make a difference. But... honestly, I've spent my whole life staring up at the stars, dreaming of other things. Of another life. One where there is no duty, no rules... no one to treat you like an inferior child," she sighed. She smiled sheepishly and shook her head. "I'm rambling, I'm sorry."

"No," he said before he could stop himself. "Do not apologize. But who would treat you like a child?"

She shook her head again. "I didn't mean that. I just... I don't know. I shouldn't be talking about this," she said.

"Then what do you suggest we discuss?" he questioned, staring down at her curiously. He knew she couldn't see his expression because of the mask, but the way she looked at him, it almost seemed like she could at moments.

Padme smiled softly. "It's your turn, pilot. I've talked enough for the both of us, I think."

"I hardly think so," he disagreed. Against his better judgment, he reached up a hand to her face and gently tugged her hood back, letting it fall down and reveal her face to the setting sun. Her hair, he noted regretfully, was up, but the hairstyle was simple and attractive.

Well, he didn't know if she could ever be *unattractive*.

He had to stop this before it got out of hand.

He let his hand fall to his side and said in a colder tone: "If I were to speak, I would most likely talk of how much I dislike the corruptness of politicians."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's a very harsh accusation, especially considering the woman who gets you your very much needed ship parts is a politician by day."

"You cannot live your life in a dream world, Senator," he snapped. "As you have just joined the Senate, you have not yet seen the disgusting lengths politicians will go to get what they want."

"And what about the Emperor?" she asked coolly, brown eyes flashing with that familiar determination he'd seen last time. "Didn't he go the ultimate length to get what *he* wanted?"

Vader felt a flash of irritation at her accusation. "He did what was necessary."

"Is that so? So you think murdering millions is necessary."

"If you are speaking of the Jedi, *Senator*," Vader growled, "then it was a justified circumstance. The Jedi were traitors to the galaxy and needed to be exterminated."

"It's still murder," she retorted.

"It is *war*, Senator," he said. "You are young and from a planet that was spared from most of the bloodshed. But you have not seen the horrors of war. You have been sheltered all your life. Perhaps it is time you saw the galaxy as it is."

She stiffened and replied icily: "You assume that I have no idea about anything in the 'real' galaxy, Lord Vader. But you have no idea what my life has been like. You have no idea of what I have seen. You have no idea who I am." She shook her head, her lip curling in

distaste and frustration. “You’re just like the others. You think I’m a child, too.” Before he could speak again, she brushed past him without a customary farewell and stormed off back towards the front entrance of the building.

Vader let out an angry growl in his throat. That was *not* how he’d wanted to end things between them. But maybe it was for the best. After all, she was inexperienced and young. She had no idea what war was... And she had no idea who *he* was.

Maybe it was time she learned the truth. Maybe she needed to stop fooling herself about him.

He was Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith. Apprentice to Darth Sidious, the most powerful man in the universe.

And he did not need to be making silly conversation with some young politician.

He returned to his castle, brooding, and entered his private chambers. The doors locked behind him with a hiss, and he pulled off his helmet and sighed.

Damn. He still couldn’t stop thinking of her. Of the way those brown eyes flashed in the orange sunlight. The way the silk of her dress skirt shimmered, or how her velvet vest tightly wound around her slender waist.

He growled in pure aggravation and ran his hands agitatedly through his hair.

Kriffing Sith hells.

TBC.

I kinda feel for Vader. Here he is, just minding his business as a Sith lord, and then SHE comes along and starts to rain on his parade. :D Hee hee. I’m not sure if Sidious is gonna like this new distraction, though...

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— ***Serena***

4. Star Killer

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Man, you guys are just THE best. Seriously. :)

OK, I'm going by Padme's attire in the movies and cartoons. Last time, Padme's dress was her packing dress in AOTC. Today, her dress (when she's going out) will be her Tatooine attire in AOTC. If you want to see a picture, Google "Padme Amidala outfits." And click on the wookieepedia link. There will be photos of all her dresses and labels underneath each picture. So look for "Tatooine attire."

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Four: Star Killer

Padme didn't know what to make of Darth Vader. One minute he was civil, amiable and even a bit funny, and the next, he was the cold, intimidating monster she'd seen on the newsreels. It was almost as if he were two completely different people. Puzzling, but also intriguing.

She sighed, staring at herself in her mirror, and turned when she heard the doorbell ring. "Tee-cee, could you grab that for me?" she called out to her protocol droid. It would be Bail's senate group... including, unfortunately, Bana Breemu. Oh lovely.

"The door or the person at the door?" the snarky female-programmed silver droid answered.

"Ha ha," Padme said dryly. "Someday I'm going to have to program that fresh tongue out of you, Tee-cee."

"If I had a tongue, that would work." Tee-Cee went to the door and answered it. "Senators, please come in."

"Thank you," Bail said with a nod, entering the room. "Padme, my dear? Are you there?"

Padme exited her bedroom and came into the sitting room, forcing a smile onto her face. Their last visit hadn't exactly been a nice one. And she was just so tired and spent.

Darth Vader, you are driving me insane, she thought with a sigh. "Bail, Mon, Senators," she greeted with a kind smile. "Thank you for coming. Tee-cee, could you get us some tea,

please?”

“No, I’m due for my exercise class in five minutes,” said the droid.

Padme shot the droid a dirty look, and the droid sighed and said in a falsely respectful tone: “Yes, Mistress Padme.” And Tee-Cee rolled out of the room.

Bail shook his head. “I don’t know how you’ve put up with that droid for all these years. Isn’t it due for a reprogramming?”

Padme stiffened. “Tee-Cee’s been with me ever since I got interested in government. She’s been my best friend throughout everything.”

“Friend! A droid! Padme,” Bail chuckled. “You never cease to amuse me.”

Padme glared at him but smiled thinly. “I’m glad I can be of assistance,” she said acidly.

Bail just patted her hand and started talking about the Rebel Alliance with the other senators. Padme tuned out after Bana started hogging all of the attention and turned to gaze out at the window, her thoughts drawing away elsewhere. Drawing away to one particular man... if he could be called a man. She honestly didn’t even know if he were human or not. Not that it mattered. Still... her curiosity would not disappear.

Things hadn’t ended well between them, not when he’d started defending the Emperor. As intriguing as he was, she wouldn’t back down from what was right. No matter what anyone said, the Emperor was a cruel taskmaster dedicated to enslaving the alien species of the galaxy and terrorizing everyone else as well. There was not one decent bone in his creepy, shriveled body. Padme shivered, remembering her first meeting with him as a government official in training. He’d been Chancellor Palpatine then. He’d eyed her with a cold, calculating gaze, and held something else in his eyes that made the hair on the back of her head stand up on end.

But Vader...

She’d felt him staring at her. She almost felt like she could sense his eyes and how they were looking at her. But she hadn’t felt uncomfortable or afraid or disturbed by his gaze. She almost felt as if he were looking at a breath of fresh air when he gazed at her. Like a man parched of thirst, seeking water and finally drowning in it.

“Padme?”

Padme blinked and looked at Mon Mothma, who was watching her in concern. “Oh, I’m sorry, Mon,” she apologized. “What were you saying?”

“We were just thinking of going on a walk down to the marketplace nearby,” Mon said. “It’s such a lovely day out.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful,” Padme said with a faint smile.

“Padme, dear, are you all right?” Bail asked her suddenly. “Your face is quite red.”

Padme put her hands up to her burning cheeks. “Oh, is it?”

Oh, Force.

“Perhaps Senator Amidala should stay home and rest,” Bana said self-righteously. “She doesn’t look well.”

Padme’s eyes narrowed. “I’m fine. Never felt better.” She rose to her feet. “It’s warm out today. Let me put on something a little lighter. Excuse me.” She turned and strode off into her bedroom. Yanking a top and skirt out of her closet, she pulled them on and made sure her hair looked all right. The top and skirt matched, a pale, aqua blue, and showed a bit of stomach skin. The long sleeves and skirt were flowing and airy, perfect for a warm day like this. It was only noon, so the sun was bright. She pulled out a light white cloak and pinned it on, returning to the main sitting room. Bana, of course, was flirting with a young male senator, and Mon and Bail and Fang Zar were talking in lower tones. When Padme came out, they stopped talking and turned to her.

Padme smiled. “Let’s go.”

The group traveled leisurely down the city street sidewalk. Somehow, Padme ended up trailing at the end, but she didn’t mind. Bana was talking enough for all of them. She took in the sights and sounds of the city, studying the people that passed glared at a passing legion of stormtroopers and smiled at a young family out on a walk together. However, she didn’t notice a shadowed figure following her, staring at her intently.

When they reached the marketplace, she separated from the group to look at the fruit.

She picked up a shurra fruit and inhaled. “Mmmm...” she hummed, smiling. It reminded her of a summer day in the lake country.

“Looks good,” remarked a deep, vibrating baritone voice behind her.

Padme glanced over her shoulder. Standing only a few feet away was a tall man. He looked to be in his early to mid thirties, and he wore all black except for a maroon undershirt. His tousled hair was fairly long, just short of his shoulders, light brown, but shined deep golden when the sun hit it right. His handsome face was well-structured, rugged. But his eyes reminded Padme of a stormy summer night on Naboo. They were the most intense blue eyes she’d ever seen, and they stared intently right at her.

Immediately, she felt uncomfortable.

“The fruit,” he said after she remained speechless. He nodded to the fruit in her hand. “What does it taste like?”

Padme glanced down at the fruit in her hand, feeling rather embarrassed. “Oh! Well, it’s... hard to describe.”

“Try me,” he said, folding his hands behind his back and walking up closer to her until he was only a little more than a foot away. Force, his voice was so deep. She felt an urge to draw back, but she was already right up against the fruit baskets.

Padme sucked in a breath at his sudden closeness. His gaze burned into her eyes. She could barely think, much less speak. “Well...” she said, trying to calm her racing heart, “It’s... well, here, see for yourself.” Determined not to be taken aback by this tall, dark stranger, she held out the fruit to him.

His eyes never leaving hers, he reached out and took the fruit from her. His warm, roughened hand brushed against hers, sending electrical sparks up and down her spine.

Bad idea, she realized immediately.

The stranger bit into the fruit and chewed on its juicy insides. He nodded and swallowed, licking his lips afterward. Padme couldn't help but let her gaze fall to his mouth, but she quickly averted her eyes from him when his eyes grew suddenly darker.

Time to leave, Padme. You don't even know who this guy is.

"Well, I should probably be going," she said with a small smile.

He frowned. "Is there a problem, Senator?"

Senator? Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Do I know you?"

The stranger's lips pressed together in a tight line. "No. Let me remedy that." He held out a hand. "I'm Anakin Starkiller."

Starkiller? Not exactly a nice name, Padme thought. Before she could stop herself, she said: "That's such a violent name."

His eyebrows rose; and she blinked, realizing what she'd just said. Quickly she added: "Oh, I didn't mean... that is to say..." Oh, Force. Her tongue would get the better of her someday.

"No, it's all right," he assured her, now looking interested. "What do you mean, violent?"

"Well..." He did want to know what she meant. Might as well tell him. 'It's 'Starkiller.' Killing the stars. Blotting out their shining light in the blackness of space, never to appear there in the same exact place again. If you kill a star,' she said, falling back into her unafraid, faraway self, "it's more than putting out a light. A star is a symbol of hope and dreams and wishes. If you kill that star, you're killing hope. Someone's dreams... and someone's wishes."

His gaze was more intense than she'd ever seen so far, but she found her eyes locked with his. "Wishes of fire," he said suddenly.

Padme stared at him in disbelief and bewilderment. How did he... "Have we met?" she asked.

He didn't smile — he hadn't yet — his face was so *stern* and severe. But his eyes glittered in amusement. "Now we have," he said. "At least partially. I still don't know your name."

"I'm Padme," she said, holding out a hand out of habit politeness. She realized her mistake almost instantly, but when he grasped her hand, she couldn't pull away. He bent down and touched his hot lips to her skin, causing her to inhale sharply.

"Pleasure," he said, his gaze flickering up to her face again. When he straightened, she moved as if to pull her hand away, but he kept it grasped in his own.

"I... I'm sorry, but I have to go," Padme said, looking away. "My friends are waiting for me."

Starkiller glanced over to where Padme's group was talking. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Ah, yes. Friends." He said the word distastefully, as if it were the most disgusting word in the galaxy.

Padme frowned and tried to pull away again. "Yes. Please, I have to go."

He looked back at her. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," she said.

He raised an eyebrow in question.

"Please don't look at me like that," she said bravely.

"Why not?"

Now she was getting mad. "It's making me uncomfortable." She tried to pull away again, but to her surprise and relief, he released her.

"Apologies, milady," he said with an inscrutable gaze. Bowing shortly, he said: "I hope we'll meet again." And he strode off through the crowds and disappeared.

Padme stared after him with a mix of confusion, anger, and relief. And for the first time in her life, she almost wished that Darth Vader had been around.

"Padme! There you are!" Bail exclaimed, sweeping up to her with a broad smile. "Who was that man you were talking to?"

Padme shook her head. "No one," she said distantly.

TBC.

So... yeah. :D Things are about to get more complicated. A lot more complicated, actually, in the next few chapters. But as you go along, you're going to see Vader and Anakin portrayed very differently from their normal counterparts. Anakin's scary, intense. Frightening. Yes, he's supposed to be that way. I always wondered how it would work if he were the older one, more mature, and Padme the younger, naive one. Very interesting switch.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

5. Worst Day

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Wow, you guys are just awesome. Thanks so much for your feedback!! :)

One reviewer mentioned concern about the difference in age between Vader and Padme. She's twenty-four, like in AOTC, and he's thirty-one. Actually, it happens to nearly be the same ages of Scarlett Johansson and Ryan Reynolds, although Ryan is eight years older than Scarlett is. And they're married. And I know several couples with nearly a ten year gap between them, but they're doing just fine. :)

Now, if he were twice her age, like Mr. Rochester to Jane Eyre, then I could see the problem. However, Jane Eyre happens to be one of my favorite novels... Although, Rochester isn't exactly the greatest guy. Well, I digress. :p

And remember that Padme was five years older than Anakin in the real story, so it's not that much of a difference here.

OK — Padme's dress today: On Wikipedia, the file image is "PadmeFull2Buns." It's the dress when you first see her in ROTS.

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Five: Worst Day

Padme didn't sleep well that night. She saw disturbing visions of darkness, pain, and strange, exotic, yet barren places that one might only read about in a fantasy novel. She was standing on a sandy dune, the hot wind whipping through her hair. Sand particles burned into her eyes. She tried to close them, but she found that she could not. When she tried walking, her feet dragged like lead underneath her.

Her sight grew darker after that. She saw caves, black, shadowy figures that hissed and sneered at her. Their red and yellow eyes glittered maliciously from underneath their hoods. They snapped at her, pushed her, grabbed for her. She tried to call for help, but her voice was scratchy and barely audible.

Someone help! she mentally cried, stumbling through the shadows. *Please! Is there anyone out there?*

When a hand shot out and grabbed hers, she tried to scream and pull away. But the hand was much too strong and refused to release her. Whimpering, she jerked back, but the hand still didn't let go.

"Let me go," she whispered. "Please."

It's all right, a low voice murmured in her ear. *Don't be afraid.*

I'm not afraid to die, she whispered back. But her mouth didn't move. She needed to see! But she was engulfed in darkness. The only thing she touched was the cold stone floor beneath her, and the hand still gripping her own.

Then what are you afraid of?

Padme bit her lip, strained to see if there was a body attached to the hand.

You. I'm afraid of you.

The hand felt strangely cold. With her other hand, she touched the mysterious hand and nearly choked. *It wasn't a real hand.* She could feel metal, cold steel, and the inner workings of the exposed joints clicking and moving as the fingers flexed against her hand.

Don't be afraid, repeated the voice in a more solemn, grave tone.

But she was. Her throat grew dry and parched as the sands whipped underneath her feet. Out of the darkness, a tall, dark figure came into view. She couldn't see his face. Only his eyes.

They were eyes of fire.

Padme bolted upright, her chest heaving. Her entire body shook. That dream had been much too real. Gasping for breath, she leaned forward, touching her head to her comforter, and dug her fingers into her sheets. After several minutes of trying to regain her calmness and sanity, she lifted up her head and wiped her sweating brow with clammy hands.

She'd never get back to sleep tonight.

Letting out a heavy, shaking sigh, she pulled back the covers and slowly pulled herself out of bed. She padded over to her windows and stared outside for a moment. Then, she turned, picked up her robe, and slipped out to her personal veranda. She turned the lights onto a low setting and curled up on the couch, gazing blearily at the passing vehicles.

She'd never had a dream like that before. Although she'd had the occasional nightmare, those were short-lived and fuzzy. None of them had been this vivid, this hauntingly real before. The thought of that cold, metal, claw-like hand gripping hers sent shudders up through her whole body. She wrapped her arms around herself and drew into a tighter, closer position on the couch.

It was times like these when she wished she had someone to be with her. Most of her friends back home on Naboo were already married — her sister, for example. She'd listen to them laughing and telling each other about their husband's habits, their quirks, and the lovable things they would do. Then came the more taboo, hush hush topics.

Padme wasn't as naive as many believed her to be. She wasn't secluded or sheltered. She'd just never been interested in a relationship. Her entire life was devoted to politics. To be plain, she was just too busy for a boyfriend or a date. She threw herself into her work, and it had paid off. She was now a Senator and lived in the Capital of the galaxy. She was ambitious, she knew, but proud of where she'd gotten herself. She'd worked hard, supported herself, and stood on her own two feet, despite many who didn't believe her capable of being a politician.

Men just got in the way. She'd gone out on a few dates here and there, but nothing major. There was one Senator — a Senator Clovis — who had wanted to kindle more than a professional relationship. But Padme hadn't been too interested. He had some shady dealings with the Banking Clan that she was suspicious of, and she didn't want to risk her career just for some guy. Clovis was nice, good-looking... but just not what she was looking for.

She actually really didn't know what she was looking for. Yet. Obviously someone kind, brave, compassionate. Strong, but willing to let her make her own decisions. Someone who respected her and her opinions. Wouldn't hurt if he was good-looking.

Padme sighed and buried her head in the couch cushions. No guy was like that. Actually, there was only one man not in her Senate group that she'd actually shared a conversation with. Well, if he could be called a man. She still didn't know if he was human or not. Oddly enough, she wanted to find out.

Plus, he was second only to the Emperor. His very aura reeked of power, intimidation, and the impression of fear. Darth Vader.

Padme shook her head. This was absurd. He went against everything she stood for. She let out a small chuckle. Darth Vader, her dream man! Everything she could ever hope for! Ridiculous.

And then, she'd met that man in the marketplace. She shivered again. His eyes were so cold... yet so intense. His presence was stifling — it overwhelmed her just to be near him. She wasn't sure how... she just knew. Anakin Starkiller. Such a dark name. Anakin wasn't bad — she liked that. But Starkiller...

Well, it didn't matter. She'd never see him again.

No, for tonight, she'd have to settle with keeping her own company.

When she awoke the next morning, she was stiff and sore. Her neck ached terribly, and her hand was asleep. She shook it out, wincing when the pins and needles set in as the blood rushed back into her fingertips. She glanced at the timekeeper and swore under her breath. Already 1000 hours? She'd slept in until 1000 hours?

This was not good. If she remembered correctly, she had a meeting with the Trade Federation in...

"Oh, *stang!*" She leapt off the couch and tumbled to the floor ungracefully. Letting out another groan, she pulled herself to her feet and darted back up to her bedroom. "Tee-cee! Tee-cee, where are you?" She yanked off her robe and dashed into the 'fresher.

“Don’t have to yell, I’m right here,” the droid said, entering the bedroom. “But aren’t you supposed to be at the Sen—”

“Yes, I know!” Padme growled. “Could you just get something for me to wear? I have to be there in ten minutes!”

“It takes that long to get there.”

“I KNOW!” Padme yelled as she hopped into the shower. She was proud of herself — she only took one minute to shower up. A new record for her. Her hair dripping, she raced back into her bedroom and found Tee-Cee bringing a pair of tall, leather boots from out of her closet. The dress was a simple, light, navy dress with some beading on the upper torso. It had no sleeves, but as the weather was unusually warm, she didn’t mind. She quickly slipped on the dress, pulled on her boots, and threw a long, thin, wrap-around navy cloak.

Her hair... it took forever to dry her hair!

She let out a frustrated whimper and decided to dry it on the way. “Tee-cee, you’re driving,” she ordered. “C’mon!”

“I can’t,” said the droid. “I’ve had one too many drinks.”

Padme promptly threw a datapad at her.

Tee-cee did end up driving, but Padme still couldn’t get her hair completely dried in time. She finally decided to go simple and leave it down. She ran a brush through it and pinned it back with a silver pull-back pin. Grabbing her datapad, she all but leaped out of the speeder and rushed into the Senate building, calling a quick apology to some befuddled Senate guards who had been about to escort her inside.

As she rushed through the halls, brushing past various people and apologizing, she glanced down at her datapad to make sure it was the correct one. But that second of not looking where she was going proved to be precarious, because the next moment, she crashed full-on into a strong, nearly unmovable body. Padme stumbled back and stared up at the figure.

Oh, no.

“Lord Vader!” she gasped breathlessly. ‘I’m so sorry! I wasn’t looking where I was going — but I’m really, really late for this meeting — trust me, I really didn’t mean to run into you — but I just had to make sure that this datapad...’ “She halted, panting, and sighed.” And I’m rambling. Lovely. Great way to make even a bigger idiot out of myself.’ She forced a bright, false smile and said in an overly cheerful voice: “Have a nice day, Lord Vader.” And before he could even speak, she brushed past him, her cheeks flaming.

Kriff, she was such an idiot! Now what would he think of her?

She made sure to look where she was going after that. Luckily, she made it to the meeting room with ten seconds to spare. Letting out a silent sigh of relief, she took her seat, nodding respectfully at the other Senators — one of which, unfortunately, was Bana Breemu, who glared angrily at her. Padme resisted rolling her eyes and straightened her cloak.

Then, the Grand Moff took his seat behind the desk and cast his beady gaze over the Senators. Padme had to bite her lip to keep from curling it in disgust. Moff Tarkin was probably one of the slimeiest, most horrible men in existence. Everyone knew he was

practically the Emperor's right hand man, other than Darth Vader. But Padme had to admit she'd take Vader any day over Tarkin. By the way Tarkin was eyeing her now, he was giving her the creeps. Vader had never done that, strangely enough.

Padme smoothed her hair down and primly placed her hands in her lap, attempting to retain her decorous image.

However, when she heard loud, rasping breathing behind her, any chance of keeping that image went right out the window. She tensed, internally panicking, and didn't dare turn around to see the person entering the room. But she didn't have to. The newcomer strode purposefully around and stood beside Tarkin, silent except for his respirator.

Padme felt like putting her head in her hands, banging her head on the desk, or running out of the room.

Although she didn't dare look at Vader, she got the distinct impression that he was more than amused. And even though she couldn't see his eyes, she knew he was looking at her.

Kriff. Kriff, kriff, kriff.

TBC...

I really feel for Padme. Don't you just hate it when that happens? Sleeping in is so annoying!

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

6. Beautiful Nightmare

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: You guys are the best! :D Thank you so much.

To Jo: It's a huge YES to your request. :) I've been dreaming about different ways I can make it happen.

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Six: Beautiful Nightmare

She didn't know which was more embarrassing: the fact that she'd slept in, the fact that her hair was still partially damp, the fact that she'd run into Darth Vader, the fact that she'd rambled in front of Darth Vader, or the fact that he was currently in the room and seemed to almost be laughing at her behind his mask.

Well, there were just too many. She couldn't pick one. But even as her face colored, she looked down at her lap and shook her head slightly, a grin forming on her lips. It was pretty funny, if she thought about it. Padme glanced up at Vader again and almost sensed his amusement at her situation. It was laughable, she had to admit.

"Something amusing, Senator Amidala?" Tarkin demanded, his sharp, beady eyes leering over her form. Padme was glad she'd worn the cloak over her dress, or else Tarkin would be staring at her chest, she was certain.

Padme cleared her throat and looked away from Vader. "Apologies, Governor Tarkin," she said sweetly. "My mind was somewhere else."

Tarkin glanced at Vader and then back to her. "I see. Well, if your mind is back here, perhaps you can be the first to speak, Senator."

Padme was internally grinding her teeth, but she plastered on a smile and nodded. "Of course, Governor. I'd be honored." She proceeded to talk about the new bill currently being debated in the Senate. 'I believe,' she went on, "that if the Emperor is to place more legions of troops in this sector, it will only increase the tension and dissonance."

"So you suggest," Tarkin said, looking ever so smug, "that we simply allow rebellion to spread?"

“I’m saying,” Padme replied, “that you shouldn’t smother them. That will only make it worse.”

“And what would you know of military strategy, young Amidala?” Tarkin asked with a chuckle.

Padme set her jaw, threw a quick glance to Vader, and said quietly: “Maybe I’m not in the military, but I know that if you strangle people, they only want to fight back harder. It’s human nature to rebel.”

“Is it yours?” Tarkin demanded.

Padme stiffened, but after a second, relaxed and gave Tarkin an easy smile. “If you’re so interested in me, Governor Tarkin, then maybe we should exchange comlink numbers and have a personal chat. But if you want to know about my rebelliousness, then maybe you should ask my parents. I’m sure they could contribute to the fact that I was a stubborn child.” She let out a small laugh, and to her relief, the other senators chuckled as well. Only Tarkin and Vader didn’t laugh, but Padme somehow suspected that Vader was once again amused by her.

She didn’t understand it. This was Darth Vader, second only to the Emperor himself. Probably the most intimidating person in the entire galaxy... and yet, she felt some sort of connection to him. It was so odd, but she somehow felt as though she knew what he was feeling. She’d always had a way of reading people, but this was different. It was more.

Padme, this is ridiculous. This is Darth Vader we’re talking about, her rational mind spoke up sternly.

Padme stared down at her lap, at a loss for what to do. She hated this. She hated not knowing what to do next.

She spent the rest of the meeting with her eyes fixed firmly on Tarkin’s sallow, cold face or her datapad resting in her lap. She didn’t dare to glance at Vader again for fear that her mind would run away with further incredulous ideas. She had to keep a level head — it was only the beginning of her first term as a Senator. She couldn’t be flustered or out of focus.

Still, even as she kept her gaze on her datapad screen, she couldn’t help but wonder what Darth Vader was thinking right now.

What Padme didn’t know was that Vader was also beating himself up mentally. For one, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. Secondly, he couldn’t stop staring at her and admiring just how beautiful she was. She wore a deep velvet navy cloak that covered a crinkled dress, but he’d seen Tarkin’s leering eyes on her lovely form and noticed Padme had covered herself up as much as possible when she’d come in.

Although he didn’t want Tarkin seeing an inch of Padme’s skin... he himself wanted to pull off the cloak to see the form-fitting dress underneath. That thought sent him back to the day he’d actually met her face-to-face, unmasked. He knew he’d frightened her with his dark, intimidating persona. But oddly enough, she seemed to be more afraid of Anakin Starkiller than Darth Vader. Why, he had absolutely no idea. Anakin Starkiller was no one. He was a

handsome stranger who clearly showed an interest in Padme. Darth Vader, on the other hand... the very name made people tremble with fear.

And yet, Padme wasn't afraid of Darth Vader at all. She talked with him like she talked to an old friend, almost. A close acquaintance, one with whom she was extremely comfortable.

She bewildered him and bewitched him with her shining brown eyes and that smiling pink mouth. She was young, but she wasn't as naive as everyone seemed to think. She was sharp, witty, and able to keep other politicians like Tarkin on their toes.

If he wasn't careful, his thoughts might never leave her. And that alone was disturbing. As a Dark Lord of the Sith, he needed to be focused, carefully calculating, and dedicated to his mission, his life. He lived to serve his Master, Darth Sidious. He would do the older man's bidding... for now, at least. Treachery was the way of the Sith, and Sidious knew it. But although Vader wasn't as experienced in the Dark Side as Sidious, he was younger and more agile. It was only a matter of time before Vader took his master's place.

Both he and Sidious knew there would come a day when Vader wouldn't want to be the apprentice anymore. But for now, Vader would serve Sidious faithfully and without question.

But then, Vader's eyes locked once more onto Padme Amidala. She was listening to Tarkin droning on and on and holding back frustration that her point wouldn't be listened to. Finally, when Tarkin halted speaking, Vader saw that she was itching to get a word in — and he decided to help her along — for reasons he could not fathom. “Senator Amidala,” he said suddenly, causing all eyes to turn to him, “I suppose you disagree with the Governor.”

The words didn't incriminate him, and they provided Padme with an opportunity to speak. It was worth it to see her eyes light up.

“I do, on most of the points,” she said, and thundered right into her opinion. Vader was again amused and in admiration of her willfulness and headstrong determination. She certainly knew how to use words. From what he could sense and see of the other senator's faces, they were beginning to agree with her. This woman, he thought, could have the power to move the earth if she so desired.

When she finished, Tarkin was left speechless. Vader could see the older man was irritated with the Senator's words, but Tarkin had nothing to say in return. Instead, the slimy old man chuckled condescendingly and gave her a fatherly smile.

“Most interesting thoughts, Senator Amidala. I look forward to your future debates with great expectation.”

Padme stiffened but nodded in return. “I'd be glad to debate any issue with you any time, Governor.”

“Indeed. But I'm afraid we'll have to save that for another time.” Tarkin put his datapad to the side. “This meeting is concluded.”

Vader knew everyone could see that Tarkin had been completely shown up by Padme, and he couldn't help but feel a burst of smug pride in his chest. He'd always hated Tarkin. The man treated him like an inferior. In fact, the only reason Vader hadn't strangled Tarkin the second he'd met him was because Tarkin was, unfortunately, a close friend of the Emperor.

He'd have to put up with the man for now. But as the Senators rose, Vader once again looked at Padme.

She rose gracefully from her seat, datapad in hand, and, to his frustration, didn't even look at him as she turned and started to walk away with the others. But just as she neared the door, she paused and glanced back at him.

"Thank you," she mouthed quickly. Then, she graced him with the widest and most beautiful smile he'd ever seen before she turned and continued out of the room.

Tarkin let out a frustrated sigh and folded his spindly fingers together. "Senator Amidala is a most intriguing young lady. However, I foresee she will be a problem in the coming years."

"She is young and enthusiastic," Vader said. "She will come to see how the Senate is run." He didn't want her to see, though. He admired her spirit and fiery passion for what she believed in... even if what she believed was wrong. On the other hand, he didn't want to see her marked a traitor.

He had to see her again.

Padme hadn't known what Vader was up to until he gave her the chance to speak her mind. She felt a trill of pleasure at the thought that perhaps Vader actually wanted to hear her side of the debate. But then, her spirits sank a second later. Maybe he wasn't trying to let her talk — maybe he was fishing for information — maybe he was spying on her to see if she had connections to the Rebels, or worse, was a Rebel.

She let out a sigh and walked down the corridor. She nodded to the people she knew but didn't stop until she turned down a smaller corridor that opened up into a wide hall. One side of the hall was a wall — the other completely glass, overlooking the grounds below and providing a quite stunning view of the heart of Coruscant. She slowed her pace and finally came to a stop in front of the window. Closing her eyes, she let the glorious morning sun bathe her in its golden rays. But as it was growing warm, and Tarkin wasn't around, she tugged off her cloak. Ah, relief!

"Good morning, Senator."

Padme turned sharply to see Darth Vader standing several feet away from her. Although her initial reaction was to tense, she relaxed when she saw him and let out a small breath of air. "Oh, it's you. Thank goodness."

"That must be the first time I've heard that," Vader remarked, taking another few slow steps towards her.

Padme laughed, her shoulders sagging with relief. "No, it's — I didn't mean..." She let out another small chuckle and shook her head. "I'm just not doing well today, am I?" She ran a hand over her hair and explained: "I just thought it might be someone else. Someone I... didn't exactly want to see again."

"Perhaps someone like Grand Moff Tarkin?" Vader said.

Padme grinned sheepishly. "Yeah. Him. You know him well?"

“As much as I ever wish to,” Vader said, surprising her with his openness. Was it her imagination, or was he more affable today? Maybe even... dare she say it — friendly?

Darth Vader and friendly just didn’t go together, though. It would be like saying Emperor Palpatine was a handsome hunk of a man.

Padme shuddered at that thought.

“Are you well, Senator?”

Padme blinked and smiled. “Yes, I’m fine. And,” she added, putting her hands on her hips, “Whatever happened to ‘smuggler’?”

Vader stared down at her for a moment before replying: “I assumed that was your title only during the night. This is your day job, correct?”

He was still playing along with her! She honestly had no idea what to make of him. “Oh, that’s right. But no one else is around, so I’m sure it’ll be all right if we call each other by our night-job names, right, pilot?”

“Indeed.” Vader locked his hands behind his back and moved around to her other side to look outside. ‘You were fortunate not to get into an accident this morning,’ he continued suddenly. “You were in quite a rush.”

Padme colored. “Yes... well... that’s what happens when you sleep in.” She scrunched up her face in embarrassment and glanced at him. “I’m sorry I ran into you like that.”

“No apology is necessary,” he rumbled, his helmet turning to look at her. “You spoke well today.”

“Thank you.” Should she mention it? Well, why not. Sucking in a breath, she said: “I appreciate what you did for me back there. I don’t think Tarkin would’ve ever let me speak again. Actually, he probably won’t now.”

“Tarkin is a fool,” Vader snarled. He folded his arms over his chest.

Padme, startled at his outburst, stared at him in mute astonishment. Finally, she regained her voice and said: “Yes, I’ll agree with you there. But he’s clever and cruel. He has so much power, but he abuses that power. Well, you were there. Billions of lives in his slimy hands, and no one can do anything about it. That’s why I believe in democracy.”

“Democracy, Senator,” Vader replied, “is nothing more than mob rule.”

“Fine,” Padme said shortly. “A republic. What we used to be — with representatives — voted in representatives — coming together to make choices that make sense for everyone’s good. On the other hand, you can also have a total democracy, which, as you say is mob rule, or it’s like it is now — one man with several others at his disposal ruling the entire galaxy. Neither is good. A representative republic is what the galaxy needs.”

“So you disagree with the Emperor’s rule?” Vader looked at her again, and she thought she could hear suspicion and a hint of warning in his tone.

But she straightened and gazed at him, unafraid. “I disagree with dictatorship. People should not be made to agree. It goes against everything we are as people.”

Vader was silent for a moment. Finally, he said quietly: “You are walking a dangerous road, Senator. Perhaps you do not remember to whom you speak.”

Was that a threat? Padme wasn’t too sure. She also wasn’t sure why it was that whenever she spoke with Vader, their humorous banter dissolved into dark, in-depth political and moral discussions that left her on edge and at odds with the Dark Lord. She was never afraid of him, strangely enough... just very annoyed.

“Of course I remember,” she said darkly. ‘I see your mask. The last thing that hundreds, perhaps thousands of people have seen before their lives are over. I see your hands. Hands that carry a deadly weapon — not only the saber at your belt, but the power of the mind. Hands that have the blood of many permanently stained on them.’ She had no idea what had given her this sudden burst of strength and bravery, but she tilted her chin defiantly up at him and continued. “I see your heart. A heart that has no love, no compassion, no true feeling for others. A heart that is cold, lifeless, and barren. A heart that is barely even beating.”

When she finished, silence reigned in the corridor. The only sound was Vader’s breathing. Padme and Vader glared at each other — well, she thought he was glaring — but neither would look away. Padme gazed into those black eye coverings, wishing desperately that she could see his eyes, see what he was thinking and feeling. For a moment, she thought she felt a quick touch in her mind, but it disappeared as soon as it had arrived.

“You are mistaken, Padme.”

Padme’s eyes widened when he ended the quiet, calling her by her first name. But she let him continue.

“You do not see.”

She raised her eyebrows in question and regarded him coolly. “I see well enough, Pilot. Enough to know that power completely corrupts.”

“Perhaps,” he conceded. “And perhaps not.”

“No?”

“No.” Vader gazed down at her. “I have seen many come to power in my lifetime, including myself. But there is one who has come to power who is not corrupt like the others. Someone who has higher standards than most.”

“Really?” she asked dryly. “Who’s that?”

“A smuggler.” Without so much as a nod, he turned and strode off down the corridor, leaving Padme more confused by the Dark Lord than ever before.

TBC...

Wow, that got intense really fast.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— *Serena*

7. Disturbing Incident

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: You guys are the best! :D Thank you so much.

***NOTE:** I've drawn up a Vader/Padme piece — inspired by **Jo**'s request. I'd love to get your feedback on the drawing. The address is: [http://serena-kenobi\(dot\)deviantart\(dot\)com/art/A-Breath-Away-150951051](http://serena-kenobi(dot)deviantart(dot)com/art/A-Breath-Away-150951051)*

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Seven: Disturbing Incident

Vader hit the play button, kept his eyes glued to the screen in front of him. After a moment, he hit the stop button, then rewind, then play again. The way the sunlight shone on her hair, making it glow brilliantly, and bringing out the dazzling shine to her brown eyes made his heart pound in his chest every single time he watched the clip. It was taken from the... discussion he'd had with her several days earlier.

He didn't know how many times he'd watched this. And it was only ten-thirty in the morning. But every time he did, he saw something new — whether it was in her expression, her movements, or her words themselves.

This was becoming a serious problem.

Vader sighed shortly, pressed the stop button. After a moment of hesitation, his hand hovered over the play button.

You must stop this. It's dangerous. She is dangerous.

Vader let out a long, frustrated breath through his nose. While his better judgment told him to turn it off, to destroy the holovid and never speak to Padme Amidala again... the innermost part of him screamed against it. She was different from anyone he'd ever met. She was strong, beautiful, and kind. Why she had... befriended him, if that's what it was, he didn't have a clue. He was the Dark Lord of the Sith.

No. He shook his head and turned off the holovid. This had gone on long enough. He let his sudden spark of anger at himself grow into a constant flow. Letting out a growl, he stood up, ran a hand through his hair, put on his helmet, and strode out of the room.

But all the while, a part of him longed to see her again. *Ached* to see her again.

However, Vader had to squash down all thoughts of Padme when he was contacted by his master, Lord Darth Sidious.

“Lord Vader.” The Emperor’s slithery tone came through Vader’s private com. “Your presence is required in the throne room immediately.”

Vader wanted to know why, but he knew better than to question his master. “Yes, my master,” he said. The Emperor hung up without another word, but Vader expected that. He did the same thing. Grabbing his cape, he fastened it around his neck and went directly to his private hangar. Ignoring the stormtroopers and aides who stood faithfully at guard, he entered his personal cruiser and piloted it towards the Imperial palace.

He couldn’t wait until he could kill the old wretch. Palpatine had been his master for too long. Soon enough, Vader would be ready to strike him down. The mere thought gave him a burst of dark pleasure. He flexed his hands on the controls as he landed in the Emperor’s hangar and paced through the palace until he finally reached the throne room. Once he stood before the Emperor, he bowed.

“Master. What is your bidding?”

“Rise, my friend. We have a guest present.” The Emperor sounded far too happy, Vader thought suspiciously. What was the old fool up to now?

When he saw a figure drawing closer out of the corner of his eye, he turned and tensed. Oh, just lovely.

“Prince Xizor,” Vader all but growled.

The infamous Prince of Falleen graced Vader with a cunning, all too pleased smile. “Lord Vader. A pleasure, to be sure.”

Vader’s fists clenched. The Emperor was up to something. And if it involved Xizor, it couldn’t be good. Hopefully, this meeting wouldn’t take too long. He couldn’t wait to get out of Xizor’s slimy presence.

“Padme! Hey, it’s Sola. Listen, Mom and Dad are gonna watch the kids for Darred and me so we can take a little vaca... how are you doing? Mind if we stop by? All right, I’ll talk you to later. Bye!”

Padme hurried out of the ’fresher and scrambled to grab the com. But in her rush, she tripped on her dress and fell on her stomach with a grunt. “Ow.” Grumbling under her breath, she picked herself up off the ground and shouted: “TEE-CEE! Thank you for getting the call for me like I’ve ASKED YOU TO MANY TIMES!”

“You’re welcome!” Tee-cee shouted back from the kitchen.

Padme shook her head and pressed the “return call” button on the com call screen. A moment later, her sister’s face appeared on the screen.

“Trickster! Why didn’t you answer my call?”

Padme ignored her sister's favorite nickname for her and said, brushing her hair away from her face: "I couldn't reach the com in time."

"What about your droid? Don't tell me you still have that blasted mouthy droid."

Padme frowned. She'd had this conversation one too many times with her older sister. "I told you, Sola, I like her. I hate droids who have no personality. They're no fun."

"At least they get the job done." Sola sighed. "So, anyway. Did you get my message?"

"Yes. When were you planning on coming?"

"Within the next week or so — probably by next Tuesday."

Padme sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "Sola, I don't think that'll work. I have a very important vote that day, and I need to spend as much time as possible getting ready for it. I'm afraid you two will be stuck here without me — and there's really not much to do in this section of Coruscant. It's the political sector. How about we plan some other time?" She hoped she didn't sound too eager to refuse her sister's presence, but Sola, almost seven years older than Padme, acted like Padme's second mother, irritating Padme to no end. She knew Sola was only trying to help and be a good older sister, but Sola's constant berating and mothering grew old very quickly.

"Oh, you'll be fine. I'm sure we'll find something to do," Sola said. "You can make time for us."

"Sola," Padme said with a slight edge to her voice, "I really can't. I'm too busy. This vote is important."

Sola sniffed. "I don't see why. It doesn't even matter what you do. The Empire's in charge, and soon all of these Moffs are going to be running things. It's a matter of months before your job becomes obsolete."

OK, that's it, Padme thought, inwardly growling. "At least I'm *trying* to do something," she snapped. "I know you and Mom and Dad didn't want me to go into politics, but I like it. It's what I want to do, and I honestly don't care what you say. I'm here, this is my life, and you have your life. All right?"

Sola stared stonily back at her sister and finally said: "Well, at least I'm married."

Padme's lips parted, and she sucked in a breath. *Oh, boy. She did not just say that.* "That was low, Sola."

"Fine," her sister retorted sullenly. "But you threw away a perfectly good chance at a happy marriage. Palo was a good man."

"He wasn't right for me."

"Is anyone?"

Padme's eyes flashed. "I'm done talking to you. Don't bother coming by." Before her sister could reply, Padme disconnected the link. She stared down at the blank screen for a few minutes before shaking her head and storming back into her bedroom. She collapsed on her bed and made a noise of pure frustration. Some things never changed. Sola would always be

ragging on her, putting her down. So what if she'd rejected Palo? He was nice enough, but there were no... sparks. No life. Plus, his idea of a good wife was one who would stay at home and take care of the kids. He never wanted to leave Naboo — he was content to stay painting in his little shop. That was fine... for him. But she wanted to travel, see the galaxy. She wanted to make a difference.

Sola would never understand. Married with two children, she was happy to be the typical stay at home mother and wife. Padme didn't begrudge her for that — what she did begrudge her was for Sola's lack of tact. Padme knew she was old enough to marry, to date.

But she hadn't *wanted* to date anyone.

Rising from her bed, Padme had a bad feeling that her sister might not listen to her and end up coming after all. "Ugh, I cannot deal with this right now," she grumbled. Not bothering to grab her cloak, she told Tee-Cee she'd be going for a walk to clear her head. Checking her chronometer, she realized that it was three twenty-seven, and she had a meeting with her fellow senators — namely Bail, Mothma, Far, and others — in roughly three hours.

I can't wait, she thought with a sigh. She made her way to the closest market and strolled around the vendors.

"Funny how we keep running into each other," said a deep voice from behind her.

Padme froze, knowing the voice instantly. She didn't turn to face him but replied: "Yes, funny. One might even think suspicious."

"Oh?"

A scowl fell across her face as she now turned to glare at him. "You're following me," she accused.

Anakin raised an eyebrow. "Indeed. What gives you that idea?"

"The fact that you're here when I'm here... and this is — what, the second time in a week?"

He smiled faintly, but it wasn't a real smile. Bringing his hands together behind his back, he leisurely moved towards her. "You're not looking at all the facts, Senator."

"Oh?" she parroted, placing her hands defiantly on her hips.

"No." He frowned. "For instance... it's been more than a week since our first encounter. You probably live close by if you walk here to this particular market... and for that matter, as I am on foot, so must I. Today is the day they bring out their new, fresh fruit because last night was when the shipments arrive. If you've lived near here for at least a month, you know that. So, here you are buying fresh food... and I might as well."

Padme gazed at him sullenly. Kriff. He had a point. "Fine. So what you want?"

"Want?"

She shivered at his dark tone. Everything about him — his clothing, his stance, his height... his eyes — was so *intense*. She got the feeling this was no ordinary man who just went to the market on Fridays. Not in the least.

"I simply want to become better acquainted. After all, we might be running into each other again."

Her eyes narrowed. "Really. You're assuming quite a bit, Mr. Starkiller."

"Perhaps, Senator," he conceded with a nod. He came up beside her and picked up a fruit. Padme noticed instantly that his hand was gloved up to his arm, but when he reached down to take the fruit, she saw a flash of metal peeping out from the glove.

"Your hand!" she exclaimed before she could stop herself.

Anakin paused, gripped the fruit tighter. His jaw tightened, and his eyes grew stormy. Padme had a feeling she probably shouldn't have said that.

"I... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that."

"No. Forget it," he answered tersely. He still didn't look at her, but kept his gaze locked on the fruit, as if he wanted to burn it up just by staring at it.

"Can I ask what happened?" she asked.

"Long story. You wouldn't be interested." Now he glanced up at her. "Trust me."

Padme, sensing he didn't want to enter into this conversation, nodded uncertainly and glanced away. "All right." She turned away and picked up a shurra fruit, sniffing it. She stumbled into Anakin when someone else abruptly bumped into her, causing Anakin to grab her to keep her steady. Padme pulled back away from him and looked at the person who'd crashed into her. It was a boy about eighteen or nineteen, a raggedly dressed boy, who was filthy and missing several teeth.

"Oh, I — I'm so sorry, my lady," the boy stammered.

Padme smiled. "It's all right. Don't worry about it." She stepped away from Anakin's hold and cleared her throat. But, glancing at Anakin, she saw his face was dark.

"Watch where you're going, boy," Anakin snapped.

The boy nodded hastily and darted off down the street. Padme shot a dirty look to Anakin.

"He's just a boy. You didn't have to be so harsh." When he didn't reply, she frowned, confused. "What's wrong?"

"That boy," he all but growled. "He just stole from you."

Padme's eyes widened. "What?"

But Anakin brushed past her without another word, heading directly for the boy who'd just bumped into her. Bewildered, Padme started after him.

"Anakin, what are you doing?" she called.

The boy who'd apparently stolen from her heard her voice, turned around, and saw the two following him. Knowing he'd been caught, he whirled around and broke into a run. Anakin, anticipating his movements, matched the boy's pace easily, but Padme, wearing a dress, let out a growl and picked up her skirt, jogging after them.

“Kriffing dresses!” she muttered, brushing past the crowds of people. She strained to keep her eyes on Anakin, but as he was taller than most of the pedestrians and dressed in black, he wasn’t hard to miss in broad daylight. But Force, was he fast! He rounded a corner into an alley after the man and disappeared. Padme hauled her skirts up to her knees and dashed after him. ‘Anakin!’ She took the corner sharply and slowed to a stop when she saw the scene before her. “Anakin, what are you doing?” she cried in horror.

Anakin’s gloved hand was wrapped around the thief’s neck, clutching it tightly, and his face was twisted into a dark snarl, his eyes a dark, wild blue. The thief choked, clawed at Anakin’s hand, but it didn’t work. But after Padme’s first cry, Anakin loosened his grip.

“Anakin.” Padme strode up to them. “Anakin, what the kriff are you doing?”

“He stole from you,” snarled Anakin.

“I don’t care!” she snapped, grabbing his gloved arm. Anakin’s head turned to her, his expression melting into one of surprise. But she wasn’t finished, not by a long shot. Breathing heavily, she continued angrily: ‘Look at him!’ She motioned to the thief. “He has *nothing*! He’s dirt poor! I know he stole from me, and it wasn’t right — but that does *not* give you the right to *attack* him!”

Anakin growled at the thief who coughed violently. Padme’s eyes widened, and her grip tightened on Anakin’s arm. “And he’s *sick*! Can’t you hear it in his cough!”

“He could be faking,” Anakin argued.

“He’s not,” Padme hissed. “Let him go.”

Anakin hesitated.

“Now,” she ordered, tugging on his arm.

Anakin didn’t move for another minute. But when he released the boy and stepped back, he grabbed the boy’s shoulder and leaned forward, growling: “Don’t ever let me catch you stealing again.” And he shoved the boy back. Letting out a whimper, the boy scrambled away down the alley. Anakin then turned to face Padme and glanced down at her hand still on his arm. “There. Satisfied?”

Padme jerked her hand off his arm, inwardly seething. She wouldn’t admit it, but Anakin’s disturbing behavior left her frightened. He’d been only intimidating before, but now... she honestly didn’t know whether or not he was a safe man. Now, he didn’t appear that way. “No,” she said, shaking her head. ‘Not at all.’ She backed away, ignoring his curiously questioning gaze. “You almost killed that boy.”

Anakin folded his arms over his chest. “He deserved it. He stole from you.”

“I said I don’t care!” she yelled. ‘That doesn’t give you the right to *kill* him!’ She felt like killing *him* right now. Only her second encounter with him — and both times he scared her. “Don’t talk to me again,” she added coldly. Straightening, she turned her back on him and strode out of the alley. She completely missed the look of surprise, confusion, and disappointment on his face.

TBC...

So yes... this is getting a lot more complicated. Who knew Padme would prefer masked, scary Vader to Anakin? Well, yes, Anakin DID try to strangle someone...

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

8. Game Start

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Love you guys! I'm going to move the story a step forward now. Instead of going back and forth between Vader and Padme and Anakin and Padme — which we'll still see — we need to move on to the more dangerous part of the plot — actually, the underlying force that moves the story along. Now that you know Vader's Vader but also Anakin (not really) out of the suit, and you know who Padme is and that she's a little more Luna Lovegood than Hermione Granger (couldn't resist), we'll move the plot along and introduce probably one of my favorite Star Wars villains. You love to hate him.

***NOTE:** I've drawn up a Vader/Padme piece — inspired by Jo's request. I'd love to get your feedback on the drawing. The address is: [http://serena-kenobi\(dot\)deviantart\(dot\)com/art/A-Breath-Away-150951051](http://serena-kenobi(dot)deviantart(dot)com/art/A-Breath-Away-150951051)*

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Eight: Game Start

In his wildest dreams, Vader never could have imagined that Padme Amidala would react in such a way. After all, he'd stopped the filthy fool from stealing from her, and he'd caught him in the act. She should've been happy, relieved... at the least, grateful. She should know he didn't just go running after some common thief for *anybody*. If it had been anyone else, he wouldn't have wasted his time. Actually, it would've been amusing to see.

But no. He'd gone after the boy. For her. *Why?*

Vader threw his helmet across the room, ignoring the way it crashed into a console and rolled to the floor, and continued to pace furiously in his private chambers. This turn of events only made things much worse for him. Before, he'd contented himself with thinking about her — it was practically all he did these past few weeks — but now, he'd actually acted on those strange feelings. And actions led to consequences. And in his case, he knew these consequences would be severe.

He would have to be very careful in the coming days. He would have to force himself to avoid her.

But the thought of not seeing her sent a strange, painful ache through his chest that caused him to wince suddenly. He massaged his chest and let out a short growl. He couldn't let

himself be this affected by such a slip of a girl. His jaw grinding in self-irritation, he strode over to his console and tried to focus on the day's business. He had a meeting with Moff Tarkin in an hour and an inspection of the newest TIE fighter, specially modified for him. Of course, he knew he'd work on the ship himself, but an official inspection was required.

Placing his helmet back on his head, he touched a few console buttons until a holo-image of Padme came up. His hand wavered over the image as he questioned whether or not to delete it. After a minute, he swore under his breath, shut down the system, and strode away. He had to get his mind set before he entered the Imperial Palace, especially now that a certain Prince had returned.

Tarkin, Vader thought some time later, was a complete idiot.

The man had no sense of the Force — he was all about machines and technology — particularly with his new terror construct: the Death Star. The moon-sized, battle space station was almost complete, and the Emperor was pleased with its progress. But Vader knew what the Emperor did not seem to understand — every technology had a weakness; and the larger the technology, the larger the weakness. It would only be a matter of time before the Rebels unlocked the secret that would destroy the Death Star. What that weakness was, he didn't know as of yet. But Vader was certain: the Death Star did have a weakness, and someone, at some point, would exploit it.

Tarkin and the Emperor couldn't be too proud of the machine they'd created. The power of technology was nothing next to the Force. But the Emperor, Vader knew, was completely drunk on power and had no notion of weakness in his fabulous Empire. He was invincible. Or so he thought. But Vader knew the Emperor was growing older and weaker every day, while he himself grew stronger and more powerful.

He flexed his fingers as he strode down one of the halls of the palace and rolled his shoulders back. He needed to practice.

"Lord Vader."

Perfect. He'd found a target. Now, if he could only use that target.

Vader halted and turned to face Prince Xizor coming up to him, fingers steepled together. "Xizor," he said shortly. "Still slithering around the halls, I see."

Xizor smiled thinly, sharp teeth gleaming. "Such colorful vernacular, Lord Vader. Have you ever considered becoming an author?"

"I have considered many things, one of which would be to snap your neck." Vader turned and continued down the hall. But to his irritation, Xizor matched his pace with long, elegant strides.

"I'm sure, Lord Vader," Xizor said airily. "But you know how much I enjoy your most instructive company."

Vader glared at him and picked up his stride. "Spare us both your ridiculous attempt at flattery, Xizor," he snarled viciously, feeling his metal prosthetic fingers grinding against their

joints. “Neither of us enjoys each other’s company anymore than we are friends with the Rebel Alliance.”

Xizor opened his mouth to protest, but when he felt Vader’s hot glare on him, and just how serious the Dark Lord was, he nodded shortly. “Very well. I will drop the pretense. But know this, Vader. I have played this game for nearly a hundred years, and this game is one I intend to win.” His reptilian eyes glittered dangerously.

Vader stared at him silently for a moment and replied, much to the Prince’s irritation: “Intend, perhaps. Whether or not you *will* win is another matter altogether.”

Xizor schooled his features and raised an eyebrow. “You should know me well enough by now, Lord Vader, that I always win.”

“Not always.” Vader let that comment sink in, knowing with dark pleasure that Xizor knew exactly what he was talking about. An accident some time ago had left thousands of Faleen dead, including most of Xizor’s family. It was part of the reason, Vader knew, why the Prince despised him so much — not to mention the fact that Vader was the Emperor’s second-in-command, a position Xizor desperately longed to acquire. However, Xizor could not understand the bond between master and apprentice, and so, he would always remain in third place. But Vader had seen over the years that the Emperor would play him against Xizor for the old man’s amusement, something which Vader greatly resented.

The fact that the Emperor had just brought Xizor back to Imperial Center increased Vader’s dislike for Sidious. Of course, he carefully hid his treacherous thoughts from his master... particularly those dealing with a certain young Senator.

“Good morning, Lord Vader.”

Vader turned his head sharply and found himself staring down at the object of his conflicted thoughts. It took him a split second to catch his bearings and return with a short nod: “Senator Amidala.”

If she noticed his brisk tone, she didn’t look offended. However, her face carried the insufferable “Senator” mask that he despised so much. He’d seen it before, but oddly enough, it bothered him much more now than it had earlier. He wanted to see her face shining, warm, and glowing, like it was when she spoke with him when he was Vader, not Anakin. He still puzzled over that matter, wondering what made the frightening mask of death more amiable than a handsome man. She’d never been afraid of Vader, but she’d been afraid of Starkiller.

She never ceased to amaze him.

Vader managed to tear his eyes off her long enough to see Xizor’s far too interested gaze directed at the Senator.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, Senator,” Xizor spoke up smoothly, holding out a hand. “I am Prince Xizor.”

Hardly a woman in the galaxy could resist Faleen pheromones, but Padme didn’t seem affected. But then again, Xizor might not have been producing enough to cause an impressionable effect. The Senator nodded, her expression still behind that neutral mask of hers, and said: “Pleasure to meet you. I’m Senator Amidala from Naboo.” She took his hand and shook it, pulling away before Xizor could kiss it.

Her speed at pulling back sent a wave of... what was it — relief? running through Vader. He honestly couldn't remember a time when he'd wanted to strangle someone this badly before.

"Naboo, hm?" Xizor said. "I've heard it is quite beautiful there, although I haven't had the opportunity to visit myself as of yet."

"It is beautiful," Padme said. "But since it's my homeworld, I'm afraid I'm biased on that subject."

"Surely not," Xizor disagreed with a flash of his teeth. "I think I will find it even more lovely now that I have seen you, Senator."

Vader had had enough. "Save your pathetic attempts at seduction for someone who is interested, *Your Highness*," he snapped, causing the other two to look at him. "Senator, you had something to say to me."

Padme's eyes glittered behind her nonchalant mask, sending a thrilled spark up his spine. "Yes, I did. Excuse us, Your Highness," she said with a nod to Xizor. "But I have a matter of the Senate to discuss with Lord Vader."

She was actually dismissing that reptile! Vader's cold amusement and his admiration for the young woman grew immensely. Remembering the standard protocol for politicians and people of importance, he held out his arm. "Come," he said. "We can speak about this in private, Senator."

"Certainly, Lord Vader." Padme lightly slipped her small hand into the crook of Vader's elbow and floated away with him down the hall. "But I warn you, I will not retract my statements on Governor Tarkin's bill. I still believe the new orders of operation preposterous."

Vader caught on immediately to her ruse. "Then perhaps you should tell him yourself, Senator," he rumbled, knowing Xizor was still watching and listening to their conversation from behind them. His gait quickened, but luckily, she didn't stumble when he did so, instead matched his pace with hastening steps. Padme was no fool — she knew it would be odd to see her speaking with him on a more personal level. So, she brought up matters of politics to throw off any prying eyes and ears.

At least, he hoped it wasn't about politics. He would find out soon enough. But since she still wore her mask, he couldn't tell, and it was aggravating him to no end.

Xizor's gaze followed the Dark Lord and the Senator as they strode away. "Yes," he murmured, gazing at the young and beautiful Senator Amidala. "This is a game I intend to win."

Once they were out of sight of everyone else and in Vader's private office, one which he hardly used, Padme turned to Vader, her hand still in the crook of his arm.

"Pilot," she said with a short sigh of relief, "you have *no* idea how *good* it is to see you."

Vader couldn't remember the last time he'd been this utterly flabbergasted.

TBC...

Hmm... Xizor's in the mix. And when he's in the mix, you KNOW things ain't right.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

9. Moving Pieces

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: I'm so happy that you guys are enjoying the story thus far. Now that Xizor's in the mix, I'm going to really get things going for our main characters. Just to warn you: I'm NOT that great of a battle/action type writer — I'm better with suspense and intrigue. Xizor isn't a direct combat villain, he's a chess player — he has a game, and he wins. If you don't know who Prince Xizor is, he's in the SW series "Shadows of the Empire". 'Shadows' took place in between ESB and ROTJ, but for this story's purposes, I'm focusing Xizor in during this time period with Padme instead of Leia. "Shadows of the Empire" is a fantastic book, probably my favorite SW novel, and I highly recommend it.

To Jo: Hey, I'm sorry, but your email didn't show up in your message. Are you a member of Fanfiction (dot) net? I can converse more easily with reviewers that way through PMs, since in general I don't like to give out my email. I'm afraid I'm not able to send you the picture directly — I can only give you a link. I'm so sorry!

NOTE: This chapter is full of V/P. :) Oddly enough, before this story, I was a strict A/P follower and only a V/P if Vader turned back to Anakin (which I'm not saying he will or won't in this story), but ever since I started writing this fic, I've been liking Vader more and more. Interesting!

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Nine: Moving Pieces

Darth Vader stared at young Senator Padme Amidala for a full five seconds, unsure if she'd just said what he thought she said. Finally, he managed to get out: "How so?"

Padme sighed and rubbed her temples. "I don't mean to sound like a complainer, but it's been a rough week, to say the least." She looked away pensively, and he was disturbed to see such a heaviness in her eyes. 'Anyway,' she continued, looking back at him with a smile, "It's good to see you, Pilot. Although I hope I didn't interrupt your conversation." To his relief, that mischievous sparkle returned to her eyes.

"Not at all, Smuggler. Quite frankly, you were an angel." Vader wasn't watching her when he said this, so he didn't notice her flush from his words. "If there is one person I cannot stand, it would be that snake Xizor. I have half a mind to strangle him in his sleep."

“That might be too nice for him,” she replied with a devilish grin.

Vader nearly let out a laugh at that but restrained himself. “Perhaps. What would you suggest?”

Padme gave him a sly smile. “Dye his ponytail permanent bright pink.”

“And they say *I* am heartless,” Vader said dryly.

She laughed and shook her head as they continued to stroll leisurely through the less-traveled corridors. “I have my moments. My sister, you know, actually calls me ‘Trickster’, because I used to play the worst pranks on her as a child. She still calls me that, which leads me to think she hasn’t forgiven me yet.”

“I was unaware you had a sister,” Vader remarked, more to himself.

“Yes, Sola. She’s more like a mother to me, actually.” Padme’s face grew somewhat irritated. “Which is one of the reasons I’m not in the best of spirits today. What really bugs me is that she keeps getting on my case because I’m not married. Ugh!” She vehemently let out a noise of disgusted aggravation.

Vader was unable to quench his curiosity. “You do not wish to marry?” For some inexplicable reason, he desperately wanted that answer to be negative.

“It’s not that I don’t *want* to get married,” she said, ‘because I do. I just haven’t... found the right man.’ To Vader’s puzzlement, she suddenly flushed deep red and refused to meet his eyes. “Anyway,” she continued on hastily, “My sister decided that it was time for her to visit, and, of course, she didn’t bother to ask if I was available, and now she’s on her way here. What can I do? Obviously, my work is most important, and although I’d like to see her, this is probably the most critical point in my career right now. I just... I don’t know what to do.”

“Your sister shows a lack of respect for you,” Vader rumbled, folding his arms over his chest.

“No,” Padme protested. “She’s just...” But when she glanced at Vader, who stared at her pointedly, she sighed. “OK, maybe you’re right. But she is several years older than I am, so I think she’s just being my second mother. I don’t blame her, but it’s frustrating, especially now.”

“Would you like me to speak with her?” Vader meant it partially as humorous and hoped she’d take it so. Normally, he would mean that as a threat, but he didn’t think Padme would be too keen on him strangling her sister.

Padme grinned. “No, thanks. I should be able to handle her. But I’ll let you know if I need any backup. You’ll be the first person I call.” She let out a small laugh and let her head hang back with a long sigh. “Oh, this is just what I needed. Thank you, Pilot.”

“I sense something else is wrong,” Vader prodded. “There is still something troubling you.”

“Your mysterious Force senses?” she said. “I should’ve expected that.”

“On the contrary,” argued he, “You have been oddly hard to read. You have a strong mind, Senator. I have no doubt you would be resistant to a mind trick.”

"I didn't know you could resist them," she remarked.

"Indeed. Only the strong and willful of mind are able."

"Oh, so I'm willful?" She arched a dark eyebrow at him.

"Extremely so. And stubborn. But I believe we've had this conversation before. You are evading my question."

Padme shook her head in defeat. "All right, fine. I've been a little on edge this past week. I... ran into someone a few times at the market near my apartment."

Vader's emotions flared. *Starkiller* was her cause of distress? She had been exceedingly angry with him during their last meeting... He pushed his own musings back in his mind as he continued to listen to her.

"It was this man — he was just... I don't know."

"Did he threaten you?"

"No, no, nothing like that. He just made me... uneasy. There was something about him. Just... his whole aura. It was smothering, in a way. You could just feel the intensity and the power radiating off him."

"Perhaps I should take notes," Vader said.

Padme's eyes brightened, and she let out another giggle. "You are in a rare mood today, aren't you?"

"Indeed. It will not be repeated often, I assure you."

Padme couldn't keep the beaming grin off her face. "Of course. Wouldn't want to ruin your reputation." She blinked, and the smile disappeared from her face once again. 'Sometimes it's easy to forget what we are,' she murmured. "Who we are. We get caught up in fantasy and forget the harsh truth of reality."

Vader struggled to bury his alarm. "That is rather unlike you."

"Well," she said quietly, "Maybe I've been too buried in my own dreams to realize what's going on in the real world. The man I met at the market reminded me of that. He brought me back to this universe and showed me the grim, harsh coldness of reality. It's not nice, and it's not pretty. It's filled with fear, hate, and rage." With each word she spoke, her voice grew darker and glum.

No — no — of all people, *she* could not be the one to lose her innocent spirit! Had he, as Starkiller, caused this much damage in so short a time? "Smuggler," he said sharply, taking her by the arm, "Did this man frighten you?"

Padme didn't respond for a moment. "Yes," she finally answered. 'In a way.' She now gazed up at him. "It's different from you. You scare people because of what you are, what you do. But he... he was different. Everything about him was so... cold. So lifeless. His eyes..." She hesitated. "They were like burning ice."

Vader released her, inwardly reeling. *She is afraid of him. She is afraid of Starkiller. And yet... she is not afraid of Vader.*

Vader had been showing himself to her as Starkiller in the hopes that she might be more attracted to him without the mask and be more accepting later on as both Anakin and Vader as one. But to his astonishment, things were completely upside-down. She was actually *afraid* of Starkiller — and she seemed to like the man behind the mask rather than the man *without* the mask.

He had noticed with a watchful gaze that her eyes would light up when he, as Vader, came up to her. Her smile was warm and welcoming when they weren't arguing; and when they were arguing, he didn't mind as much as he thought he would. When she was angry, those brown eyes would flare with fire and passion, sending a burst of heat to his body. He wanted to grab her and kiss those soft lips over and over.

Vader clenched his fists and let out a long, slow sigh, attempting to maintain his self control.

"Pilot?" Padme asked softly, resting a small hand on his arm. "Are you all right?"

Vader nodded. "Yes. Perfectly so."

In reality, it was the opposite. He had to switch gears now, change all of his plans — not that he had really thought out his plans when it came to Padme. No, when it came to her, everything was so out of the ordinary for him. But now that he knew Padme preferred Vader to Anakin... things were now completely different.

Now, he was hesitant to reveal himself to her as Starkiller. Apparently, looks didn't matter to Padme. He still didn't understand it — she knew what he was as Vader — a heartless killing machine. She'd said as much herself. But still, she wasn't afraid of him.

He thought about trying to meet with her again as Starkiller and try to get back in her good graces. Maybe he needed to try a different approach as Starkiller — he just wasn't sure which approach. And if she couldn't like the man without the mask... what would happen if she ever tried to discover the face behind Vader's mask?

"Stop."

The recording halted.

"Play back four seconds."

The recording played.

"Pause."

Prince Xizor stared hard at the two figures on-screen, his skin turning to a cold sage color.

"There, you see for yourself," the one other man in the room crowed. "It appears as though Lord Vader is not discussing mere politics with the young Senator Amidala."

"No," Xizor said coolly. "He is not."

Although he couldn't see Vader's face — he wished to dearly — he saw Vader take Senator Amidala's arm. Saw her smile up at him once, twice, several times. Who in the

Emperor's name was this woman that was so bold and unafraid of the most intimidating man in the galaxy? Granted, the Emperor was frightening, to be sure... but he was a different kind of frightening. While he radiated a darkness that none other could match, a blackness all around him that no light could penetrate, Vader reeked of pure, hardened *power*. Even Xizor had to admit no one could outmatch Vader in that competition.

But this... this was interesting. Who would've thought that Darth Vader, lord of the Sith, would be spending his little spare time roaming the halls with the newly elected, young, certainly naive Senator Padme Amidala of Naboo?

Maybe even Vader had a weakness for beautiful women... but Xizor highly doubted it. The Imperial Court was full of the most beautiful women out there. He knew many of them well. But Vader had not shown interest in women once. Xizor almost doubted that Vader was human... or even organic. But if so, why suddenly be spending time with Senator Amidala?

"This is not the only recording," the other man spoke. Xizor turned to him and raised an eyebrow.

"Indeed, Your Majesty. How many others?"

"Several," the Emperor croaked, his wrinkled lips curling back in a wicked grin. "I am certain these will be of use to you."

"How so, Your Majesty?" Xizor knew, of course, what the Emperor was implying, but he wasn't about to just come out and admit it.

"I'm sure you will find something to do with them," the Emperor told him silkily. His sickening yellow eyes gleamed maliciously out from under his black hood. "Now leave me." He turned his chair away from Xizor, signaling that Xizor had better leave before he became displeased.

Xizor bowed low. "Your Majesty." He left the room immediately.

Once he was in his personal speeder en route to his Coruscant palace, he pulled out his private comlink and typed in a number. As he waited for the other caller to pick up, he took out the recording collection the Emperor had given him and played one of the vids. He paused the image when it came to a certain place.

Then, the other line answered the call. Xizor went right to business — he didn't have time for pleasantries.

"I am in need of your assistance, bounty hunter," he said brusquely.

"What is it?" the other man grunted.

"Follow and watch Senator Padme Amidala closely. Report back to me on everything she says, does, and where she goes. Do not fail me." Xizor hung up before the bounty hunter had time to reply. But he knew that the hunter didn't need any more words spoken. No, bounty hunters, especially the best ones, like this man, knew exactly what to do and how to do it. Fett would be the man for the job. And if he failed... Well, Fett knew the consequences of failure.

Xizor gazed at the image of Padme smiling with a sudden intensity.

This project would prove interesting. Very interesting.

His skin color began to shift to a warm golden hue.

TBC...

Uh-oh. This ain't good. But now we've come down to it — and things will pick up within the next two chapters. It's going to get good, I promise. :D I'm giggling with glee (internally) just thinking about it. Yes, I'm weird like that.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

10. Fire Storm

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By Serena

A/N: Thank you guys so much!! :D This chapter and the next are probably some of my favorites in this fic. You'll see why when you scroll down and read. ;) I won't spoil it.

***NOTE:** I've gotten several people asking me **WHO** in the world is Prince Xizor?! If you want to learn about him, go to the Star Wars wiki at Wookieepedia (dot) com, or pick up the novel "Shadows of the Empire." You'll get a better feel if you read the novel, and it's a quick read, but it's probably easier to just go online.*

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

"If you cannot afford to lose, you should not play the game."

— Prince Xizor from "Shadows of the Empire"

Chapter Ten: Fire Storm

"It was a dark and stormy night," Padme said dryly, staring out her window as the rain continued to pour down her windows. Thunder crashed, and she shivered and wrapped her arms closer around herself, curling up into the couch.

It was late afternoon, but thanks to the dark clouds and drenching rainfall had made the whole day feel like four o'clock, as it was now.

She couldn't help it, but she was afraid of thunderstorms. She was ashamed to admit it, but ever since Sola had told her scary stories about the violent Thunder-gods as a child, she'd been traumatized ever since. She knew she shouldn't be afraid anymore as an adult, but when the thunder boomed and shook her apartment building and lightning split the sky in front of her, she felt like diving under the covers and never coming out again.

She'd spent the dreary day reading reports, baking for several ill Senators, and, she was slightly ashamed to admit it, watching sugary romance holodramas. Well, she was a woman — and women needed to watch things like that sometimes. Padme, although she'd never say it, was a secret romantic at heart. As a child, she'd loved fairy tales and watching as the handsome hero swept the damsel off her feet.

But those were so stereotypical, she realized now. Whereas the hero would be tall, blue, eyed, and handsome and save the damsel in distress, Padme had oddly enough found herself not daydreaming of a handsome hero but a tall, midnight-colored mask and strong, gloved hands.

“Ugh!” Padme threw a pillow across the room, feeling very silly. What would her parents think? She was already on thin ice with Bail and his group as it was. The last time she’d talked with Mon and Bail, she’d gotten a stern talking-to for her associations with Vader.

When her comm unit beeped, she groaned and buried her head in the couch cushions. She didn’t want to get up. She was too warm and cozy. But after the comm beeped twice more, she sighed and slid off the couch, padding over to the comm unit. When she saw who was on the other line, her face lit up, and she answered the call. Immediately, the image of a young woman blinked to life — a woman who looked very similar to Padme, in fact. However, the other woman’s cheekbones were more pronounced, her neck was longer, and her skin paler. In addition to that, her hair was lighter, had blonde and red highlights, and hung down in gentle waves, as opposed to Padme’s silken curls.

“Sabe!” Padme greeted her dear friend with a wide smile. “How are you?”

Sabe gave her friend a mock glare. “I would be better if *someone* call me more often.”

Padme winced. “I know, I’m sorry — I’m a terrible friend. But it’s just been so busy here with all of the work and everything...”

“Excuses, excuses. But seriously, I understand,” Sabe said, grinning. “But it’s my job to nudge you. I’m a professional, remember?”

Padme laughed and shook her head. “I don’t think you’d ever let me forget. How are things in Naboo these days? How are the other handmaidens doing?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Sabe said with a nonchalant shrug.

“What do you mean?” Padme asked, confused.

“I’m not on Naboo, my dear,” Sabe replied airily.

“What? Where are you?”

“On my way to Coruscant.” Sabe grinned.

“You *what*?” Padme gasped. “Sabe, what happened?”

“Oh, you know — I’d had enough of being the queen’s decoy, so I shot her and took her place permanently.”

“Very funny.”

“Fine, fine,” Sabe said. “I was tired of taking orders, so I told the queen to go pound sand, and I quit.”

Padme stared, wide-eyed, at her dearest friend. “You did what?” she squeaked.

Sabe laughed. “You are such a Gullible Gungan, Padme. I’m taking a vacation. I got a week off, so I thought I’d come by and visit Coruscant... namely, you, my dear.”

“Sabe, that’s amazing news,” Padme said, feeling suddenly helpless, “But I don’t know how much time we’ll be able to spend together. My job is taking up a lot more time than I thought — but I want to be able to see you as much as possible —”

“Girl, I’m only coming to crash at your place and mooch off of you,” Sabe said with a chuckle. ‘Why else would I come?’ She looked at Padme with a more understanding expression and added seriously: “I know you’re busy, and I’m not coming to get in your way. Now that I’ve been promoted to Head Handmaiden, I’m allowed more leeway. I’m actually coming to help you out — with anything. I’m just here to support you — not to get in your way. But if you really don’t want me coming, that’s fine. Just let me know.”

Padme’s shoulders nearly sagged with relief. Sabe, she had to admit, was more of a sister to her than Sola was. Sola was more like an aunt, a second mother, being several years older than Padme. But Sabe and Padme were nearly the same age and had done everything together growing up. Padme didn’t know if she trusted anyone more than Sabe, and this instance was no different. While Sola only wanted to lecture Padme and be a mothering busybody, Sabe genuinely wanted to help her and support her. It was so refreshing.

“Oh, Sabe, of course I’d love for you to come,” Padme said, smiling.

“Good! I’ll be here in a few days. Love you, Padme! Stay strong.”

“You, too, Sabe. I’ll see you soon.” Padme watched as the screen became blank. She stood there for a moment, relishing in warm childhood memories, when a loud roar of thunder rattled the floor beneath her, and she let out an undignified squeak and dove back onto the couch. She sat there for a moment and looked out at the storm once more. It was so dark and violent. Not unlike Starkiller, she thought distantly. He probably loved storms like these. Vader probably enjoyed storms as well.

And there she was — thinking about him again...

Tee-Cee rolled into the room, breaking her train of thought with: “The cookies are burning.”

“What?” Padme bolted off the couch and ran into the kitchen. “I thought I told you to watch them!”

“I was too busy painting my nails.”

“Tee-Cee!” Padme moaned, throwing open the oven. To her surprise, the cookies were only slightly burnt. Padme growled, grabbed the oven mitts, and took the cookies out of the oven. Just then, as if to irritate her further, the doorbell buzzed. Padme turned to ask Tee-Cee to get it, but of course, the mouthy droid wasn’t there. ‘Arrrrgggh!’ She growled, scrambling out into the foyer. “Tee-Cee —” She slammed a hand (the oven mitt still on) on the door control — “I am going to *kill* you!” She turned her head to the person standing in the door and froze.

Darth Vader.

“Pilot!” she exclaimed breathlessly, suddenly realizing that she must look a mess. She self-consciously brushed an untamed strand of hair out of her face. “Um...” She followed his gaze to her oven mitts and the tray of cookies still in one hand. “Cookie?” She grinned sheepishly and held out the tray.

Vader stood there for a moment, simply breathing. “No, thank you,” he finally said. “I came to give you several reports you requested earlier in the week.”

“Oh. Oh...” Padme took the datapad from his outstretched hand and looked it over quickly before shooting him a questioning glance. “I thought they were going to net-mail it to me... I’m sorry you had to come this far out of your way.”

Why on earth would Darth Vader come to my apartment to drop off a simple datapad? She flushed and shifted on her feet.

“It was no trouble,” he spoke with a slight inclination of his head. “I was needed in this sector as it was.”

“Oh.” Why did she feel so disappointed? ‘Well, thank you anyway.’ She glanced down at the cookies and sighed. “Kriff. I’ll have to make another batch.” Before even really thinking about it, she turned around, leaving Vader standing in the open doorway, and walked back into the kitchen and set the tray down on the stove. She yanked off her mitts and brushed herself off, padding back into the living area. To her surprise, Vader had entered and was standing in the entrance to her living area and looking around.

“Oh, I’m so sorry — where are my manners?” she asked shamefully. “Would you like to sit down?”

“No, thank you,” he repeated, turning to her.

Padme caught the pillow she’d thrown on the floor out of the corner of her eye and moved over to pick it up. As she neared the couch, a particularly vicious crack of lightning, followed immediately by a huge boom of thunder caused her to let out a short gasp and stare at the sky.

“Are you all right?” Vader asked her in a low voice.

Padme looked at him, embarrassed. “Oh... yes, I’m fine.”

“You seem on edge,” Vader observed, taking a step towards her.

Padme sighed and looked away, curling a strand of hair around her ear. Why was it so easy to talk with him? She didn’t know whether to be relieved or disturbed by the fact. “When I was little, I was afraid of thunderstorms,” she admitted.

Vader studied her. “Have you ever experienced one in the outdoors?”

“I don’t know,” she said, startled. “I’ve never actually been in a thunderstorm before.”

Vader gazed at her for a long moment. “You have a veranda on the other end of your apartment,” he said suddenly. “Which is the way to reach there from here?”

Padme stared at him in mute bewilderment for several seconds. Finally, she blinked and stammered: “Um, well, that way.” She pointed to her bedroom door and felt herself grow even more red.

Vader swept out a hand, indicating her to lead the way, and, after another confused pause, she turned and started for her bedroom, murmuring: “This way.” She opened her bedroom door and led him through the passageway down to her veranda. She was burning with questions, but she held them in until they reached the veranda. Although the main sitting area

was covered, the rain poured down into the open landing pad, and the wind caused the white drapes to billow gently in the breeze.

Padme hovered near the doorway, but when Vader came up behind her, she drew forward onto the terrace near the seating area. The air, to her surprise, was deliciously cool and moist. She could feel the light spatter of rain drops hit her bare arms as she slipped nearer to the pouring rain. Thankfully, although she could still hear the thunder, the unrelenting downpour had lightened to a steady rain that pattered against the stone.

Padme inhaled deeply, faced the open sky, and let her eyelids slide shut.

I had no idea... this is beautiful.

The thunder rumbled again, but she wasn't afraid.

She had no idea that Vader was seconds away from storming up to her, ripping off his helmet, and crashing his lips onto hers. She had no idea that his emotions mirrored the storm — tumultuous, thundering, and white-hot as the lightning.

But Padme did sense him watching her. She turned to him, unafraid. Feeling suddenly bold, she held out her hand.

“Dance with me,” she said softly.

TBC...

This was one of the first scenes that came into my head when it came to this fic. So, yes, I'm going to keep it going through the next chapter — which, I'll just let you know now — will be LOTS of V/P. Some pretty intense V/P, too. :) But there's action and danger involved as well.

Also, I'm bringing in Sabe because she's also going to be a big character coming later on. :) You'll see why.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

11. Shadow Dance

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you guys so much!! :D This chapter is one of my favorites in the fic. Took me long enough to write it... argh.

NOTE: I'm sorry it's taking me so long to update. I had midterms, and one of them didn't turn out too well... :(

Background: The Empire has recently been put into place. Anakin/Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

"To contend with Xizor is to lose."

— Prince Xizor

Chapter Eleven: Shadow Dance

Darth Vader didn't remember the last time his breath had completely been sucked out of him. He didn't think he had ever happened to him in his life before.

Until now.

This woman... this beautiful angel was holding out her hand to him — a ruthless, cold executioner. She actually wanted to take his hand. She wanted to be near him. She didn't care about the mask, or what he was, or who he was. She understood him. She knew him — better than anyone else ever did. She might not have known about his past, what he had done, what he was planning to do, or just how dark his mind really was, but something about her touched him in a way nothing else ever had.

He almost wondered if she was Force sensitive.

But then, he realized, it was simply her.

And here, in the the thundering storm, in the rain that sprayed gentle, glowing mist drops on her pink cheeks and bare arms, Lord Darth Vader saw for the first time true loveliness. And for the first time, he had no idea what to do.

Pushing against any rational, sane judgment, he stepped forward and took her small hand in his.

"I believe," he said, "that one generally requires music to dance to." But he drew closer to her all the same.

Padme smiled and stepped up near to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not 'one', and I don't like being general," she said. "Besides, I don't go outside in thunderstorms, either, but it looks like you've made me break that rule. I don't see why we can't break several more."

Vader nodded and conceded: "Indeed." He began to step slowly, back and forth, in a mild waltz. He'd also heard it termed a 'slow-dance' from several other Senators.

"When was the last time you danced?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't dance," he told her. "However, I have observed it on many occasions."

"Have you ever wanted to?"

"No," he answered. "Not until now."

He was rewarded with a blinding smile. Padme said in a softer voice: "Thank you."

"For what?"

"You've officially gotten rid of my fear of thunderstorms." No sooner had she said this when a crack of lightning hissed down in the sky near her building, and she shivered. 'Well,' she added with a sheepish laugh, "Mostly."

"So, I am now a Chaser of Fears as well as a Pilot?" he asked dryly.

She laughed softly. "Looks like it. I'll have to do something else to keep up with you."

"On the contrary," Vader replied, "You have done so much already. You have many years ahead of you." He didn't want to bring up the fact that the Emperor planned on completely eliminating the Senate within the next few years. He couldn't do that to Padme... not now. He ignored the dangerous warnings his mind and training were screaming at him and focused his attention on the woman in his arms.

"I hope so." She tilted her head and added gravely: "But I think we both know my job isn't going to last very long."

"Giving in so soon?"

A smile broke out on her face. "Never. And, I'm a smuggler. We always figure out how to bend the rules."

"This coming from a respected senator," Vader chided. "I don't know whether to be impressed or disappointed."

Padme's grin turned sneaky. "There are the rules, and then there are the real rules. I may be young, but I'm not an idiot."

"I never thought as much," Vader replied quietly with a nod of his head.

There was a pause in their conversation, but not an uncomfortable one. The thunder rumbled again, vibrating against the stone veranda. Padme smiled suddenly and looked down at her feet. Vader followed her gaze and realized she was barefoot.

“That tickled,” she laughed quietly. She then looked up at him with an earnest, gentle expression.

Vader gazed down at her. Filled with a violent rush of unfamiliar emotions, he gently pulled away his hand from her waist and reached up, brushing his fingers against her soft cheek and cursing the fact that he could not feel it against his own skin. Her eyelids fluttered, but she looked up at him with suddenly dark, soulful eyes.

“Padme,” he murmured, uttering her name for the first time in a low rumble. Instinctively, he leaned closer... and so did she. If he could only remove his helmet... they were merely a breath away. He heard her inhale sharply, saw her eyelids slide closed...

Then, a sudden rush of the Force screamed at him.

Padme had no idea things would have come this far. Not only was she dancing with Darth Vader, but she was so close to him! Her breath hitched as he drew closer to her. She could imagine his warm breath on her skin, the light, oddly gentle touch of his lips on hers...

All that disappeared in a blink as Vader abruptly grabbed her and shoved her back towards the couch. Padme let out a cry of pain as she hit the couch and felt a lightning hot pain sear her side. Before she could adjust or even think, a laser bolt flew by Vader’s body, right where Padme had been standing. Ignoring her gasp of astonishment and cry of pain, Vader whirled around and ignited his lightsaber.

What was he... wait!

“Look out!” she cried, pointing to an assassin droid hovering in the air.

The droid sped towards them, firing more shots, but Vader easily stepped in and blocked them, lightsaber sizzling in the rain. After a moment, the droid apparently realized its tactic wasn’t working, and it turned and zoomed away.

Vader let out a growl and held out a hand. Crushed his fingers together in a fist. The droid, in turn, crumpled into itself and started to fall, but Vader opened his hand. The droid levitated towards him and fell into his hand. Vader looked up, his gaze sweeping across the city, and then turned around to face Padme. He halted when he saw her.

“What?” she whispered. ‘What is — agh!’ She winced and grunted, pressing a hand against her side. She’d been hit. “Kriff.” She normally didn’t swear, but now seemed like a reasonable time to do so. “Why did that thing attack us?” She glared at the crumpled droid still in Vader’s hand.

“I don’t know,” Vader growled, ‘but I intend to find out.’ He strode up to her, took her hand away from her wound. “You’re hurt.”

“Yeah... I noticed.”

“We must treat that immediately before it becomes infected,” he said shortly. Before she could say anything, he knelt down, slid a hand under her back, and picked her up in his arms. She let out a short gasp and latched onto his neck. Force, he was so tall! Saying nothing else, Vader stormed off the veranda and up into her bedroom, where he gently placed her on the bed, pulling back instantly. Padme felt a little disappointed at the loss of his warmth but didn’t say anything. She really didn’t have the chance, because Vader demanded: “Where is your medical kit?”

“In the ’fresher. I — wait, Tee-Cee can get it. Tee-Cee!” she called.

The droid rolled into the room and looked at Vader. “Am I interrupting something, O Wise and Great and Powerful Mistress of the High Heavens?”

“Yes, my train of thought,” Padme shot back. “Can you grab the med-kit for me, please? I don’t want to make Lord Vader go fishing around for it.”

Tee-Cee looked at Vader. “Why not?”

Padme felt the color drain from her face. “Tee-Cee!” she hissed. “Please! Just do what I say this once! If you hadn’t noticed, I’m injured and cold and I don’t have time for colorful banter right now.”

“Obey your mistress at once,” Vader thundered, starting for the droid.

The droid (if it were possible) gave him a sulky expression and rolled towards the fresher. “Fine, fine... no need to go Mr. Angry Android on me.” She disappeared into the fresher.

Padme smiled weakly up at him. “Sorry about that. My droid and I have a... different relationship than most people do.” Force, her side was killing her!

“I can see that.” Vader stared after the droid then turned to her. ‘Padme, lie still.’ He strode up to her and bent over her, touching her shoulder lightly but firmly. “You will only make it worse.”

“Yes, I know,” she sighed. “It’s just uncomfortable.”

“Here.” Vader reached over, grabbed a pillow from the other side of the bed, and slipped a hand under Padme’s neck. “This will make it easier.” Gently, he lifted her head up and tucked the pillow behind her. She lay back and nodded.

“Thank you. Much better.”

Tee-Cee rolled into the room and handed Vader the medkit. “Anything else I can get you, Sunshine?”

Vader whirled around and glared at the droid. Padme just knew he was glaring at Tee-Cee, even though she couldn’t see his eyes. “No,” he replied brusquely. “Leave us.”

Tee-Cee looked at Padme, who nodded wearily. “It’s all right. You can go. Thanks, Tee-Cee,” Padme said with a sigh. She rubbed her forehead, overwhelmed by the day’s events.

Tee-Cee shot Vader a seemingly suspicious glance. “All right,” the droid said with a wary tone, “but don’t try anything funny.” She pointed a metallic index finger at Vader and rolled out of the room.

Padme felt herself flush crimson from embarrassment. Groaning, she rubbed her temples. “I’m sorry about her. She’s just...” She trailed off when Vader bent over, opened the case, and then drew unexpectedly close to her, gloved hand reaching out towards her side. When her breath caught from his proximity, Vader hesitated. Quickly she breathed: “It’s all right. I trust you.”

Vader stared at her, and she could almost sense his disbelief. “You yourself have said these hands have blood on them,” he rumbled. “Are you willing to be touched by them?”

Padme gazed at him for a moment, then nodded. “You’re healing me. You’re not hurting me.”

Vader paused, glanced down at her wound. “No.” Then, apparently emboldened by her statements, slid her shirt up enough so that he could fully see the wound. It was cauterized already because of the blaster burn, but it could easily become infected.

Impulsively, she reached out and took his hand. “I need something to hold onto,” she told him nervously. He nodded and didn’t reply. Steadying herself with a long breath, she closed her eyes and prepared for the worst. The pain came on suddenly, and she flinched and squeezed his hand tightly, but didn’t cry out.

“I apologize,” he said.

She shook her head. “It’s all right.” She continued to have a firm grasp on his gloved hand and scrunched up her nose when the next jolt of pain hit her. She didn’t realize until she squeezed his hand for the fourth time that she was not holding flesh and bone — only sharp steely metal beneath his glove.

Strange.

But then the pain came again, temporarily causing her mind to focus on her wound.

“I am hurting you,” Vader snarled, his voice a low hiss.

“No,” Padme gasped. “Really, it’s fine. It’s not your fault.”

Vader stared at her, then sighed and drew his hand back after another minute. “The worst is over. The only thing left is to put some disinfectant cream, then a bacta patch to help seal the wound.” He reached back and picked up the cream. And, not for the first time that day, he hesitated, staring down at the bottle. Padme saw him look down to her, then to the cream; and she realized that it would be difficult, messy, and somewhat unsanitary to dab the cream on her skin with gloved hands.

He’d have to take at least one of the gloves off. Inside, she felt like squealing from excitement — maybe she’d finally know if he were... well, human or not! What were his hands like? Would they be scarred? Calloused? She was itching to know. But, then again, he looked so uncomfortable...

Padme swallowed her curiosity and spoke: “I’ll put it on.” She reached up to take the cream from him.

But to her astonishment, he let out a small, frustrated growl, let the bottle drop onto the bed, and, in a completely un-Vader like, agitated manner, tugged off his glove. Padme’s eyes widened, and she struggled to bite back a smile. He was human! His hand was strong, with

long, elegant fingers. They were calloused, scarred on his ring finger knuckle and on the back of his hand.

He opened the bottle, squeezed some of the cream onto his fingertips, and reached out and touched her skin. She shivered instinctively, murmured: “Cold” with a sheepish smile, and wondered distantly if this was a strange dream. Vader carefully applied the cream to the wound, pausing when she would flinch from contact with the wound.

However, after a minute or two, his movements became more methodical, and she found herself relaxing, breathing more deeply. His hands were so warm...

Her heart rate doubled when his gentle dabs slowly turned into light, soft strokes against her skin. His movements slowed, but he didn’t move his hand off her side. Padme bit her lip and let out a sharp breath as his fingers stroked across to her stomach, causing it to tingle pleasantly. Pulling his hand back slightly, he touched her neck, fingers dancing along her collar-bone. Her eyes slid shut when his hand slid up her neck and brushed her cheek. Her forehead. Her lips.

“Mistress Padme, I — YOU!” Tee-Cee rolled into the room and glared at Vader accusingly (if a droid could glare).

Vader growled but pulled his hand back and snatched up his glove, practically jamming it onto his hand. Padme gazed up at him regretfully and shot her droid a sullen look. Of all the times to come rolling in...

“What is it, Tee-Cee?” Padme asked with a sigh.

“Your sister called. She wanted to talk to you.” The droid was still staring at Vader. “She wants to know she’ll be coming by within the next few days.”

Padme groaned, covered her eyes with a hand. “Oh, kriff.”

“No,” said Vader suddenly.

Padme frowned and peered up at him. “What?”

“You must tell her to return home,” Vader said, turning to her. “Padme, you cannot stay here.”

“What?” She felt like a broken memory chip.

“That droid did not attack me initially,” Vader said, apparently not taking notice of her less-than-intelligent words. “They were after you.”

Padme blinked, felt her stomach curl up uneasily. “Why? I didn’t do anything... I don’t even have any enemies yet! I just started!” She felt a little foolish, being this incredulous when she knew most senators got plenty of death threats at least every day. But really, she’d only just started a few months ago! How could she have gotten an enemy who wanted to kill her — and had tried to kill her — so soon?

“I don’t believe it’s what you think, Senator,” Vader said grimly. “That droid was advanced, rare. I’ve only seen its type several times. It belonged to a bounty hunter, most likely — a well-known bounty hunter. Those droids cost a fortune on the black market.”

“Which means... the person who hired the bounty hunter must be...” Padme trailed off.

“Worth a fortune, yes,” Vader finished for her with a nod. ‘But not many can hire bounty hunters — at least, excellent ones. I will not allow this attack on your life to go unpunished, Padme,’ he promised her, fists clenching. “I must start an investigation at once.”

Padme nodded faintly. “Um, all right. So, I should just play it normal, right? Act like nothing happened...”

“Are you foolish?” he hissed viciously, taking a step towards her. “You cannot stay here, Padme.”

Padme’s mind reeled. What was he talking about? She had to leave? “What do you mean? I should go to a hotel? Under-cover?”

“No.” Vader paused, said angrily: ‘Padme, someone is going through a lot of trouble to try and kill you. Someone exceedingly dangerous — perhaps, we shall see, close to being as dangerous as I. You cannot stay here — or go anywhere where you are vulnerable. No,’ he said with a finality in his voice. “There is only one place you will be absolutely safe.” He gazed at her. “My castle.”

Padme’s mouth fell open.

TBC...

So... yeah. :D This was probably one of the hardest scenes for me to write. But if you think Padme’s just going to want to fly away with her rescuer, I’m afraid you’re wrong. We all know how stubborn and (sometimes reckless) she can be...

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

12. Mind Game

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: I deeply apologize for my lack in updates. It's hard for me to find time because college work is keeping me so busy.

***NOTE: IMPORTANT:** I'm determined to keep this story under thirty chapters. Twenty-five at most, if possible. I originally wanted it to be shorter, like ten to fifteen, but that's not going to happen unless I make my chapters really, really long. But I just want to let you know, this isn't going to drag on. After this chapter, things will definitely pick up. It won't be that many more chapters.*

***ANOTHER NOTE:** I'm thinking of doing a sequel, actually, I had planned on it. Anyone interested? It's a little early to be asking, but I just thought I'd shoot it out there.*

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Twelve: Mind Game

"Your *castle*?!" Padme's incredulous words rang out in the astonished silence that had permeated her bedroom.

Vader simply stared at her and didn't reply for a minute. She didn't know if he was displeased by her tone or gauging her reaction. "Yes," he said finally, in a tone that she didn't care for too much — his 'commanding' voice. "It is the only place you will be safe. In any other residence, I cannot guarantee your well-being."

"But I just can't up and *leave*! Especially to stay with *you*!" Padme ran a hand through her untamed hair. "What will people think? What will the holonet say? Can you imagine what my colleagues would say to me? Do you have any ideas of the rumors?"

"I hardly care for insignificant little rumors, nor do I care for the gossiping of corrupt politicians," Vader said coldly.

"But my reputation would be ruined!" Padme protested angrily. "My career would be out the window in a split second!"

Vader paused. "Your reputation is important," he conceded.

“Oh, good.” She brushed away a stray strand of hair. She was relieved he finally saw it her way.

“However, all of that would be irrelevant. No one will know you are with me. Or where you are, for that matter.”

“*What?*” Padme squawked, bolting upright and immediately wincing after she did so, grabbing her side. Vader started for her, but she shook her head, waving it off. ‘What,’ she said after she could talk again without injecting pain into her words, “are you saying? I’m going into hiding?”

“Yes.”

“But what about my job?” she cried. “I have a life! I have things to take care of — bills to vote on—”

“There are others who can take your place for the time-being,” Vader interrupted impatiently. “Only until I find this assassin. It will not be long.”

“You don’t know that! And I don’t, either! No — I can’t leave. I’m sorry.” She shook her head, clamping her limbs together firmly.

“This is not up for debate, Padme,” Vader warned, taking another step towards her.

“You’re right, it’s not. Not anymore, because I just said no.”

“You *will* come with me, you foolish woman.”

“I won’t.”

“Your life is in danger, Padme!” Vader growled.

“I’ll hire a bodyguard.”

“No,” Vader snapped.

“Why not?” Padme demanded, now putting her full-force glare on him. She folded her arms over her chest petulantly. Good Force, why couldn’t he see that she could take care of herself? That she didn’t need a knight in shining — or black — armor to sweep in and save the day? She’d had death threats before. She knew it would be part of this job even before she left her parents’ house. But she didn’t care — she’d do what she needed to do, kriff the consequences.

“No hired bodyguard will capably protect you,” Vader said.

“You don’t know that!”

“I do. I’ve seen it happen many times.”

Padme sighed, rubbed her temples. “Look, I’ll be fine here. I’ll put security around, I’ll make sure my windows are laser-proof — I’ll be fine! I knew the risks when I took this job, Pilot! I don’t need you playing hero!”

“I am playing nothing,” Vader thundered. “But you, it appears, are prepared to play with your own life, you reckless girl.”

"I don't care what you say," Padme yelled. "I am not leaving! Plus, my sister is coming. What would I tell her?"

"Tell her to leave before she arrives."

"But — I can't just—"

"If you won't, then I will," Vader hissed.

Padme stared at him, wide-eyed. Then, she blinked, gathered herself together. "No. No. Wait a minute. Wait a *kriffing* minute! You can't come into *my* apartment and just *order* me around like one of your officers! I will not be told what to do in my own *kriffing* bedroom! If you don't like my decision, then you can leave!" She pointed to the door, her heart thundering with excitement and anger.

Vader seemed to glare at her, his breathing more rapid than before. His fists clenched, the leather material of his gloves making odd groaning sounds as his fingers tightened against his palms. Padme honestly didn't know what to do at this point. She couldn't exactly *make* him leave — he was *Darth Kriffing Vader!* She had absolutely no hope of trying to defeat him physically. On the other hand, would he force her to do something? She had thought they were... well, she didn't know if they could be called friends, exactly. But would their odd relationship (whatever that was) prove enough for him to trust her decision?

When he moved for her, her first thought was: *Apparently not.*

"What are you doing?" she demanded furiously as he promptly scooped his hands under her back and legs and picked her up as easily as if he were holding a datapad.

"You will not see reason, so you leave me no choice, Senator." Oh, did he sound smug!

Enraged, Padme tried to shove him away, move out of his grasp, and growled, "Put me DOWN, you insufferable oaf!"

"This is the only way, Padme," Vader said, obviously not bothered by her insults.

"NO IT SURE AS KRETH IS NOT!" she roared, and kicked her legs, straining to rid herself of him. But when she twisted her torso, her wound inflamed, and she hissed and curled up instinctively. His grip tightened on her.

"If you wish for your wound to heal, you will cease and desist this ridiculous attempt to free yourself." His voice carried an ominous hint — but not in a threatening way towards her person.

"No, you will cease and desist dragging me out of my apartment! Tee-Cee!" she yelled.

"Your droid can do nothing. I've temporarily shut her down."

"You WHAT? How..." she spluttered, realizing in despair that he must've used his strange Force powers to shut Tee-Cee down without manual control. "Turn her back on! I mean it! I'm not going to just let you haul me away without my consent!"

"Your stubbornness will get you killed, and I will not let that happen," he replied firmly, striding into the lift.

"My stubbornness? Why you stuck up... half-witted... scruffy-looking... Nerf herder!"

“Insults will get you nowhere,” Vader replied, sounding oddly amused. The door to her apartment opened, and he strode into the hall at a rapid pace. However, instead of entering the lift, he continued down the hall and entered through another doorway.

“What are you doing now?” Padme demanded, crimson-faced.

“My ship is docked in your private hangar,” Vader said. “Yours will probably already be wired with explosives.”

Padme swallowed down a painful gulp of fear. Despite her unwillingness to cooperate with him and the fact that he was all but kidnapping her and bringing her to his castle, she knew deep down that under his protection, she couldn’t be safer with anyone else.

But still... he was Darth Vader. Cold-blooded killer. She’d heard reports of him wiping out an entire species just so he could do the Emperor’s will. Life was far from precious to him. And yet, here he was, protecting her. A nobody Senator, a young girl. He wasn’t... wasn’t planning anything... unsavory, was he? Sudden fears rushed into her heart and mind, and she wondered if this was all some trick just to get her in bed. But Vader wasn’t like that — at least, she’d never heard of him raping anyone. Then again, he was Darth Vader. He could do anything and get away with it.

Padme bit her lip and stared up at him. Then, she frowned. No. He wouldn’t do anything like that to her. Here he was — saving her life!

They entered the hangar bay, and Padme saw his ship. Black, of course, and sleek, altogether a well-designed craft, obviously built for speed.

“How do you know they haven’t rigged yours with bombs?” she whispered suddenly.

“I would be aware of it. My cruiser is far more advanced than yours.” The cruiser’s door slid back with a hiss, and the ramp lowered quickly.

Padme scowled up at him. “Well, not all of us get as much money as you do,” she hissed. “You’re probably the richest man in the galaxy, second only to the Emperor, I bet.”

“You are in the right. However,” he said, stepping up into the cruiser, “I am trailed closely by a third party. I believe you’ve met Prince Xizor,” he spat out, lowering her into the passenger’s seat. He took the pilot’s chair and started up the engines. The door closed, and the ramp slid back into the ship.

“Yes,” she said warily. “I rather wish I hadn’t.” Fighting back an oncoming chill, she gingerly wrapped her arms around herself. It was cold in here, and her shirt was sleeveless. She shivered violently as the hangar doors opened, and the cruiser burst through.

Vader’s helmet swiveled to look at her.

“Watch the sky,” Padme said crossly, irritated that he hadn’t even let her take a sweater.

Vader returned his gaze to the sky route. But, after a second, he pressed the autopilot button, reached up to his neck, and detached his cape. Rising, he stood over her and draped it over her shoulders and her torso. It covered her entire body and then some, dropping down to the floor, where her small bare toes peeped out from under the black material.

Padme didn’t say a word until he returned to his seat and reengaged manual controls.

"Thank you," she said softly.

He said nothing.

"But I'm still mad at you," she added sharply after another pause.

"I understand," he said. "However, nothing you say will alter my decision."

Padme looked away. "Yeah, I got that," she muttered.

"Padme," Vader said in a more forceful tone. "This is for your own protection."

"I didn't ask for your protection."

"No. But you need it."

"And who are you to make all the decisions for me?" she demanded coolly, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. "You may be Lord Darth Vader, but you do not command me. I'm not a slave to be ordered around."

"No," he hissed sharply, startling her. "You are not a slave." His fingers flexed angrily against the controls. It was only then did Padme realize how fast they were going.

"Um... you might want to slow down."

"I don't recall asking for a back-seat driver."

"I'm in the front seat, you dolt," she shot back, ignoring him when his helmet turned sharply to face her. 'And watch the kriffing sky!' She pointed to the front view-window. "It's my life we're talking about, here! You know — the one you're *so bloody determined* to protect?" She barked out a laugh and folded her arms over her chest, wincing when she touched her wound. "Oh, the irony. All this effort to save me from an evil assassin — and I'm killed by reckless speeding by the guy trying to save me."

"I wouldn't waste my energy on ridiculous debates such as this, Smuggler," Vader warned in a growl. "I believe I know how to fly my own ship."

"Clearly, you don't, or otherwise you wouldn't be breaking every traffic rule in the — WATCH OUT for that speeder!" she yelled, pointing to a grey speeder that nearly collided with them.

Vader swerved sharply to get out of the way, even though it was his fault in the first place, and put on another burst of speed and dove downward. "I know how to drive, Senator!" he thundered.

"No, what you're doing is *suicide*!"

"Don't tempt me to sedate you," Vader threatened.

"Don't bother — I'll be dead meat by the time we reach the next light!"

"I am *perfectly* in control," Vader snarled, pulling up sharply.

Padme shook her head in frustration. "So do all guys that speed... until they end up as sky-kill splatter on someone's windshield."

"Would *you* prefer to drive, then?" Vader hissed.

“Yes!”

“Unfortunate,” Vader boomed, “because you are too injured, and I do not let anyone else drive this cruiser.”

Padme glared at him. “You’re a jerk.”

“Well, you are irritating.”

“You’re the one who wanted to take me! So it’s your fault! Now you’re stuck with me — at least, until you kill me with your kriffing speeding!”

“I am not speeding!”

“I can *read* the speedometer! You’re going over fifty over the limit!”

“I know what I’m doing. And look,” he added with definite superiority in his voice, “We have reached my castle.”

Padme had been too busy arguing with him to realize that they were coming up on the second-biggest structure in all of Coruscant, second only to the Emperor’s grand palace. Vader’s castle. A hulking black and grey structure that stood out among the other buildings. She’d seen it before, but never this close. In fact, she hadn’t even known anyone who had been *inside* Vader’s castle. One thing about Vader — he was a loner. He didn’t go to parties, and if he did, he didn’t talk to many people, and he certainly didn’t hold parties or let the press into his own castle.

Frankly, Padme thought with growing dread, it looked more like a prison.

And she would be the first senator to ever be inside its dark walls.

That thought filled her with anxiety... and yet, more disturbingly, repressed excitement.

TBC...

After all of the more serious, darker chapters we’ve had, I thought it would be good to add a chapter that has some good-old fashioned arguing banter. :) It’s what made Han and Leia’s relationship. But there won’t be many chapters like this — it’s going to get a lot more serious and darker. This story isn’t a comedy, and it’s not going to be lighthearted. Just to warn you!

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

13. Enter Dark

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you guys so much! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

***Note:** This story won't go over twenty chapters, I think. I've pretty much planned out each chapter, so I know where I want to go.*

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Thirteen: Enter Dark

Padme stared in awe and anticipation as the cruiser sunk down into an underground hangar bay. The doors shut them inside, surrounding them in a thin light. Padme couldn't see much, and she saw even less when Vader powered down the ship. For a tense moment, the only sound was his breathing. Then, he rose and asked her if she could walk.

"Um, I think so." She braced herself on her hands and tried to push herself out of her chair. It didn't work as well as she'd hoped, and Vader quickly supported her. But she winced every time she took a step, so as they started down the ramp, he suddenly swept down and picked her up again, striding down into the hangar bay.

Padme shot him a sour look. "It'd be nice if you could ask me, you know, before you do that."

"I'll keep that in mind." They exited the hangar bay through a set of doors and started down a more brightly lit corridor. After that, Padme couldn't keep up with all of the paths they took, and she gave up trying to figure out the direction they were going and focused on Vader.

Padme bit her lip pensively. "Do you know how long it will take you to find the assassin?"

"A few weeks, perhaps less. However, the assassin was a hired gun, most likely a bounty hunter. I need the source."

"How will you find that?"

"I have my ways," was all he said. There was a dark note in his voice that she didn't like, and she looked away.

Neither of them spoke until they reached what she supposed was the main part of the castle. Finally, they came through another set of doors, and Vader stepped out into an open hall at least five stories tall. One side was lined with tinted windows, revealing the city, and the other was a stone/durasteel mixed wall lit with inset lamps. The hall was sparsely decorated with a side table set against the wall, and two consoles, one on either side of it. Vader passed through the hall and entered through a large doorway into another great hall, but this was lined with closed doors. They continued through several of these massive corridors until Vader reached a closed door. It opened as he moved up to it, and when he walked inside, Padme turned her head to see.

It was a bedroom. Dimly lit, once the lights blinked on, and also sparsely decorated with a metal side-table, a dresser, and a floor-length mirror. There was no window, much to Padme's dismay. It was large, to be sure, twice the size of her current bedroom, but it was so dark and foreboding. The walls were dark gray, the bedding looked starchy, stiff, and was black, the furniture was plain and cold, and the carpet was black.

Padme didn't want to admit that she felt like bursting into tears when she saw where she'd be staying for who knew how long. Swallowing back tears, she blinked rapidly, clearing away any potential wetness in her eyes, and licked her dry lips. She had to trust that Vader would be able to find this assassin soon.

Before she went out of her mind.

"You can put me down now," she said quietly. "I can manage from here."

Vader looked down at her for a second but acquiesced to her request, setting her down near the bed. She straightened her dress and glanced down, seeing that the gaping slash in the dress was growing larger. Her stomach and wounded side were visible, and the tear was reaching around to her other side. Suddenly embarrassed, she folded her arms over her chest and looked up at him.

"Um... you wouldn't happen to have any extra clothes?"

Vader paused. "Yes, I would. You should rest, Senator. I will return shortly. The 'fresher is just through that door." He pointed to a closed door on the wall facing him. "Rest now. You need it." He turned and strode through the doorway, and the door hissed shut behind him.

Padme stared after him, and slowly turned around, swallowing again. She gingerly shuffled over to her bed and carefully sat down. Gazing forlornly at her hands, she sighed and rubbed her temples.

She wasn't sure what scared her more: the fact that she was in a dark, lonely castle, or the fact that the castle's master happened to be Darth Vader. And it seemed that he was its only occupant.

Darth Vader and her alone in a castle. She never in a million years would have believed this could happen.

Her tired eyes swept the cold, dark room, and she shivered. She hoped Vader came back soon before she froze to death. But then, a strange thought hit her. What, exactly, did Vader plan on giving her for clothing? Something of his? Or... or was it something for women? A mistress, for example? Padme scowled at the thought of Vader having a mistress. If he did,

she'd probably be like all the other skanks. Blonde, buxom, legs from here to there, and a dazzling white smile lined with ruby red lips. If he had a mistress, she probably would've seen his face, too.

Not for the first time, Padme wondered what Darth Vader was hiding under that frightening mask of his and felt strangely angry when she wondered if another woman had seen it already.

Padme grit her teeth for a moment before ashamedly reddening. She rubbed the back of her neck and tried not to think about it. But why would it bother her, anyway? Why should she care if Vader had mistresses?

Unfortunately, she couldn't think of an answer to that question.

When Vader returned several minutes later, she was cold, weary, and anxious. She couldn't help it— as soon as he entered, she immediately checked to see if he had brought an expensive dress, or something of that sort. To her utter relief, however, it was quite the opposite. And for some reason, Vader seemed uncomfortable with the situation. He strode forward and held out two pieces of black clothing.

Padme took them and unfolded them. The first was a large black cotton shirt, definitely a man's. It would fall down to her mid-thigh. She held it out and stared at it for a second.

"They will be too big," Vader said, sounding slightly embarrassed. "The other item is a pair of pants. Unfortunately, I have nothing else at the moment."

Padme broke into a grin. "That's all right. This is great for now. Thank you." Why on earth did she feel so pleased?

"I can have some female items sent out for you tomorrow," Vader continued. "While you are here, a droid will see to your needs." He nodded and turned to leave.

"Wait," she said, "what about dinner? I'm not sure where the dining room is."

Vader glanced back. "I do not eat in the dining room," he said. "You may eat there if you wish, or you may eat here."

Padme didn't like that clenching in her stomach. She fidgeted on the bed, asked hesitantly, "What about you?"

"I eat alone." He stared at her for a moment. "I'll send the droid directly." With that, he walked briskly out of the room, leaving her all alone once more.

Padme felt her gut twist painfully. Would she be all alone for the rest of her time here? Stuck with only mindless droids, undoubtedly Empire standard, with no personality, and no one to talk to? Even Vader, the one person she thought she'd be seeing, now seemed to be leaving her by herself.

Overwhelmed by the day's events, Padme slowly laid back on her bed and cried.

Once he'd entered his room, he let out a sigh and sank against the wall. He leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling.

What the kriff had he gotten himself into? What had he been *thinking*, bringing *her* here to his castle that housed only droids?

He'd been trying *not* to think about, not to let her take over his mind... and that organ beating inside his chest. He clenched his jaw and ripped off his helmet, tossing it onto the bed. Feeling emotionally and mentally tired, he rubbed his temples and pulled off his gloves, sinking back against the wall again. He had enough to think about, what with the Emperor planning to send him on a conquest to the systems that were not yet under Empire control; and now Xizor was here, causing trouble. Now he had an assassin after Padme, and he had no idea why they were after her. And now she was staying *with him* in *his* castle.

Vader shook his head, letting out a snort. He'd felt her conflicted emotions. She thought he was being cold, that he didn't want to be near her, that he only considered her an annoyance.

He let out a half groan, half growl and tugged off his cape.

Force, she had *no kriffing idea* how completely wrong she was.

He'd give anything, *anything* right now just to be close to her. Just to be with her. To hold her again.

Unmasked.

A day. A whole day, and Padme had seen nothing of Vader. The only time she'd heard his name mentioned was when the toneless, emotionless droid told her he would be busy for the day. While she wanted to believe he would be busy out searching for her assassin, for the most part, she just wanted to see him. She told herself she'd see anyone, but deeper down, she wasn't sure. She had thought that she and Vader were... well, friends. Or friendly, anyway. Despite disagreeing wholeheartedly with what he did, his politics, and his methods, she enjoyed his company. She liked talking with him.

As the day passed, she realized she was liking it far too much.

If Bail and Mon could see me now... pining away for Darth Vader, she thought wryly as she sank into bed and pulled the covers over her. Sighing, she curled up, careful not to touch her side, and closed her eyes.

Then, she realized she'd forgotten to close the door.

Sighing again, she pulled herself out of bed and set her feet on the floor. But just as she had, she looked up and saw a dark shadow breeze past her doorway.

Padme stifled a gasp and whirled around, slipping up to her nightstand. She opened the drawer and, to her surprise, found a pistol, which she hastily grabbed and loaded. She then crept out of her room and down the hall. If she could only contact Vader!

She saw the shadow move down the dark, ominously quiet halls. She wouldn't be able to get the intruder at this range. So, she kept back and followed him through the dark corridors.

Her heart pounded wildly against her ribcage, so loudly that she was almost afraid the intruder would hear it.

Finally, the intruder halted at a closed door. He bent over in front of the security console, his back to her.

Padme boldly stepped forward and pointed her gun right at him. “Stop or I’ll shoot.”

The intruder whirled around, startled, and pulled out his own gun. Padme now saw his face — he looked about thirty-five, was brawny, tall, and ruggedly handsome, she had to admit. His piercing dark eyes stared at her in confusion, then amusement.

“Drop the gun!” Padme ordered.

The man grinned roguishly. “Well, well, well,” he drawled in a deep voice. “Didn’t realize Uncle Dee had his own company here. Didn’t think he was into that.” His gaze swept over her body.

Padme glanced down and saw that she’d forgotten to put some pants on, so most of her legs were exposed. “What?” she exclaimed in horror, blushing crimson. “No! I’m not — it’s not like that!”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Really? Than who are you?”

“You first,” Padme snapped, growing irritated. “What are you doing breaking into this castle?”

“First, my boss is here. Second, it ain’t breaking in if the system’s that bad. You’re only breaking in if you get caught.”

“Which you did,” Padme shot back.

The man laughed. “By you? Nah. We’re at a standoff, brown eyes. You ain’t caught me yet.”

Padme’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you?”

“Feisty little thing, ain’t ya?”

“Now!” Padme growled.

Before the man could answer, the door behind him slid open to reveal none other than the Dark Lord himself. Padme expected him to toss the intruder halfway across the planet, but to her astonishment, Vader did nothing of the sort. He glanced at Padme, then to the man.

“Jixton,” he rumbled. “I expected as much. I don’t recall sending for you.”

“Yeah, well, it ain’t a party until someone crashes it,” the man called Jixton replied, shooting Vader a grin. Then, glancing at Padme, he added: “But now we can really get this thing going. We got guns, girls, good-looking guys... Whatadya say, brown eyes?”

“You’re insane,” Padme stated in disbelief.

Jixton laughed. “You got spirit, babe, I’ll give you that.”

“Enough,” Vader growled suddenly. ‘Put the gun away, Jix. You won’t need it.’ He turned to Padme and took a step towards her. “Padme, it’s all right. You don’t need to fear him. It’s only Jixton, after all.”

Jix shot Vader a sullen look. “Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ve got half a brain, Jixton,” Vader said dryly. ‘Figure it out.’ He swept past Jixton and came up to stand beside Padme. “This man is an agent of mine,” he said. “Jixton, this is Senator Padme Amidala, my guest for the time-being.”

“Is that so?” Jix said, eyeing Padme closely.

Vader turned to him; and Padme got the distinct impression that Vader wasn’t too happy with him at the moment. Jix understood as well and looked away from Padme.

“So your name is Jixton?” Padme said, breaking the awkward silence.

“Not my full name, but yeah.”

“What is your full name?”

“Can’t tell you, brown eyes. I’d have to kill you.” Jix’s eyes sparkled mischievously.

“His name is Gunnery Sergeant Wrenga Jixton,” Vader finished, sounding more irritated than before. Taking Padme’s arm, he snapped, ‘And if you’re finished with your pathetic attempt to infiltrate this castle, you will meet me in the usual spot. I will join you shortly.’ He glanced down at Padme. “Come. You’re still injured.” He tugged gently on her arm and led her back to her room.

Padme shot a quick, inquisitive look over her shoulder and saw Jix shaking his head and disappearing through the door. Then, she looked at Vader. He didn’t seem to happy, but she didn’t care. “What exactly does an agent of yours do?”

“Many things,” he said brusquely.

Growing more annoyed by the second, she glared at him. “Is he going to find the assassin?”

“Perhaps.”

“Are you going to keep me locked up in here until you find him, or will I actually be able to talk to a person instead of a droid?” she demanded.

Vader glanced at her sharply. “There is no one but me here, Smuggler.”

“Yes, I know,” she said icily. “So, as I am your *guest*, as you put it back there, and as you are the *host*, I’d like to see more of you other than midnight meetings involving secret agents.”

Vader halted. Padme got the hint that he was in disbelief at her words. Finally he said, “I am extremely busy, Smuggler.”

“Can’t you give me something to do, then? Maybe I could just keep you company while you work,” she suggested. “I wouldn’t get in the way.”

Vader let out a long breath, which she took to be a sigh. “That is a possibility. I could, perhaps, use your advice on several... diplomatic issues.”

Her eyes lit up. Anything would be good at this point. “That’d be great! Thank you!” She beamed at him and took his arm. He released hers in turn and guided her more slowly down the corridor. When they reached her room, she released his arm and turned to him. ‘I do appreciate this, you know,’ she said honestly. “I know you’re busy with... a lot of things.”

“Things you do not approve of.”

“No,” she agreed, “but friends have disagreements.” She didn’t want to think about what Vader did, so she kept it to the disagreement stage. She knew what Vader was, but she doubted anything she said was going to change him. He’d been this way for years, and he’d never been anything else. The only thing she could hope to do was maybe try to get him to see her side, if nothing else. Maybe reconsider some things.

“Friends,” Vader repeated tonelessly.

Padme grew a little uncertain at his voice and frowned. “Yes. Friends. We are friends, aren’t we? At the very least?” Her own words sounded hollow in her mouth. Friends indeed. Friends didn’t dance the way they had danced yesterday. Friends didn’t touch each other the way he had touched her. Friends didn’t provoke the kind of feelings she felt when he was near her.

Oh, bloody kriff.

Padme felt her face heat up, and she swallowed, her heart racing. She stared at him with a sudden horrible realization that left her throat dry and her tongue numb.

She had feelings for Lord Darth Vader. She *felt* something for him. Something strong, stronger than she’d ever felt for anyone before.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

She blinked and found him regarding her. She wished now more than ever that she could see behind his mask, see his emotions, what he was thinking. She’d always prided herself on reading people well, but it was harder with a mask.

“At the very least,” he said in a low voice, not sounding too happy, oddly enough.

Wait. At the very least. What was he saying? Padme stared up at him, wondering, but before she could ask him anything else, he turned and strode away down the dark corridor, leaving her feeling very confused, very cold, and very alone in the dark.

The Faleen prince glared icily at the bounty hunter before him. Steepling his fingers together, he said, “I thought I made myself completely clear. You were supposed to *observe* the Senator and take her on my orders. Not *attack* her.”

“I sent the droid to injure her. She’d be easier to take if she couldn’t walk,” the bounty hunter growled, fingering his gun.

Xizor leaned back in his chair. "I am beginning to question your methods, Fett. Perhaps you didn't understand me when I said that I wanted her *unharm*ed." His eyes narrowed.

Fett's helmet tilted upward defiantly. "Look, you want me to do the job or not? You don't like my methods, I don't give a damn. I got plenty of other clients waitin' for me. So, if you want me to take her, I'll do it my way. If not, get someone else," he sneered.

Xizor didn't like that reply at all. Rising from his chair, straightening to his impressive height of almost seven feet, he said coldly, "You have been working for me for years, bounty hunter. However, if you refuse to obey my orders, you leave me no choice." His eyes flickered to the woman standing silently behind Fett.

As the bounty hunter whirled around, the blonde woman leaped forward with a startling speed, wrenched the gun out of Fett's hands, and knocked him across the helmet, sending him tumbling back to the floor.

Xizor gave a cold smile. No one talked to him like that. Guri would ensure that Boba Fett learned his lesson. He hadn't yet decided if he wanted the bounty hunter dead, but with a few broken ribs and fingers, at least. Fett was good, but he couldn't handle Guri. His smirk widened as Guri dashed forward, light as a cat on her feet, and snatched Boba's arm, dislocating it with a sickening twist.

Boba grunted in pain, and Xizor's smile grew, revealing a set of gleaming, sharp teeth.

However, the prince's joy was short-lived.

As Guri reached for Boba's head, the bounty hunter slammed his good hand up into her neck, and a lightning-bolt pulsed through her body. She choked, jerked back, trembling from the magnetic pulse. This was the opportunity Fett needed. He leaped to his feet, kicked her in the stomach, and pulled out a gun, shooting her precisely in the leg and shoulder. Then, he aimed for her head.

Xizor, stunned, shouted, "Stop!"

Fett halted, tilting his head slightly upward.

"Perhaps I was wrong about you," Xizor said, attempting to remain calm. He'd never seen Guri, an HRD, twice-over stronger than Fett, taken out this fast. "I will allow you one more chance to take the Senator and bring her to me. I am a gracious man."

Fett snorted, backed away from Guri. "This is a temporary agreement," he growled to the Faleen. 'I do it my way. If you don't like it, hire someone else. But don't try to double-cross me. There's a reason I'm the best.' He started for the door, but glanced back. "Oh, and my rate just doubled." With that, he left the room, leaving Guri lying, incapacitated on the floor, and Xizor fuming.

He glared down at his HRD. "Get up," he hissed.

This was not how he'd imagined this situation. Fett had better get him the Senator quick before he sent out his assassins on the bounty hunter.

He ignored as Guri crawled out of the room, and sat down at his desk. Bringing up an image of Senator Amidala, he let out a long breath. Now, this was much more pleasant. He licked his lips as the thought of the young senator in his chambers. Soon.

Very soon.

She would be his.

TBC...

All rightie, there's that. My chapters are going to be longer, around this length, from now on. And next chapter, we'll be bringing in a familiar face that's a favorite character... let's just say her name starts with an 'S' and ends in 'abe'... ;D. Also, hopefully, I'll have a very, VERY special surprise for all you V/P fans. :D That's all I'm saying about that.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

14. Shifting Pawns

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you guys so much! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

***Note:** Some of you guys mentioned that you like Jix. I'm so thrilled! If you've read my other SW stories, you'll know that I love Jix and try to put him in as many of my SW stories as possible. He's a character with so much potential, but Lucas probably thought he was too much like Han and figured nobody wanted another ruggedly handsome Corellian guy. :((sob)*

That's why I'm giving Jix so much love.

***Jo!** This chapter is for you. :)*

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Fourteen: Shifting Pawns

Gunnery Sergeant Wrenga Jixton wasn't a man to be messed with. Life had battered, shoved, and knocked him around over the years. But he'd learned to knock back twice as hard; and now, things seemed to be all right for him. For the moment, anyway. Then again, working directly under Darth Vader kept him on his toes — not just the threat of the dark lord himself, but the missions he'd get. They weren't exactly easy missions. But then again, nothing with Vader was ever easy, and Jix thought the dark lord amused himself sometimes by giving Jix almost impossible missions.

Still, the pay wasn't bad, and he was alive.

For now.

None of the missions, though, had been impossible for Jix. Some had irritated him, pissed him off, and others just plain nearly got him killed. Still, he could handle it. Whether it was the Corellian blood, his training, his reckless lifestyle, or just his personality, Jix generally didn't have too much trouble with the missions.

However, this particular mission would turn out to be something quite different from all the rest.

He just didn't know it yet.

“Place gives me the creeps,” Jix muttered under his breath as he slipped into the deserted home of Senator Padme Amidala. It was eerily quiet, with the only sound the whisper of the wind moving against the windows outside. It had that cold, abandoned feel to it, something that he didn’t like. Obviously, he knew where the Senator was, but coming back here gave him an odd feeling for some reason.

It’d all started when that slip of a girl had popped up out of nowhere, dressed in what was clearly a man’s shirt (and *only* a man’s shirt), pointing a gun at him. Now, people pointing guns at him was nothing new. Beautiful women pointing guns at him was nothing new, either. Beautiful women with not much on pointing guns at him still wasn’t out of the ordinary for him. Granted, although he knew he was good-looking, he didn’t spend much time around girls. Just didn’t have time for them, working for Vader and all.

But the one thing that had him completely gobsmacked was the fact that a beautiful young woman, dressed in her underwear and a man’s shirt that was much too large on her, pointing a gun at him, was in *Darth Vader’s castle*.

He still couldn’t figure that one out.

First of all, he’d never, ever seen Vader with a girl. Not that Vader would show that side of him when he was around, but still. Secondly, if Vader did have a woman, he figured she’d be the leggy blond bimbo — not much brains, just something to look at. Men like Vader normally didn’t want women who were smart — it threatened their egos. At least, that was what ninety-five percent of the Imperial male officer population had. He assumed Vader would be the same.

Now, he was starting to realize that maybe he didn’t know Vader as well as he’d thought. This woman was beautiful, to be sure — stunning, actually. But she wasn’t at all what he’d expected. And it didn’t appear as if she were sleeping with Vader, due to her stammered, incredulous denials of the fact. And she hadn’t been lying.

Jix rubbed his forehead. This was all very strange. Just like this kriffing apartment.

He just needed information, and a look around. It was highly likely the assassin would be watching this place. Jix would scan the surrounding area, ask a few people some questions. Unfortunately, the droid that Vader had recovered (and damaged nearly beyond repair) didn’t prove to be much help. It was a standard, albeit expensive assassin droid, and could be found millions of places on Coruscant alone, in legitimate places as well as the black market. There was really no way to trace it to its owner at this point.

Jix had suggested (big mistake on his part, he later realized) that they return directly to the source of the issue, Padme. “The assassin will probably come after her again,” he’d said that night he’d first met the Senator. “Why don’t we just bring her back? The guy’s gonna try again.”

“Use her as bait?” There was a dangerous edge in Vader’s tone.

But Jix didn’t see any other way. “Yeah, why not? She seems like a tough chick. And if I’m watching her back, then she’ll be fine.”

Vader took a step towards him. Uh-oh. Not a good sign. Jix’s warning bells flashed in his head.

“You suggest we simply wait for the killer to strike again,” Vader said darkly. “Put her in that kind of danger after I’ve ensured her safety here?”

Jix paused. “You got a better idea?” Probably not the wisest thing to say at that point.

“Do not test me, Jixton,” Vader growled. “I have put up with your insolence for this long. My patience only goes so far.”

Jix swallowed, nearly bringing a hand up to his throat. “Right. What d’you want me to do, then?”

“Search her apartment. Keep a close eye on it for the time being. Oh, and...” Vader paused, and Jix almost thought he heard a hint of amusement in the dark lord’s voice. “Turn her droid back on.”

Jix resisted the urge to groan. If there was one thing he hated, it was stakeout missions. Give him a gun and something to shoot at. He liked that. Well, maybe he could find a few bucket-heads to punch out in his time off. Bar brawls were always fun.

Jix forced himself back to the current situation. He was now inspecting an empty apartment and would have to stay close by for the next few weeks, or until, or if, the assassin showed up again.

He made his way into the kitchen, always keeping out of sight of the windows, and moved stealthily through the whole apartment, into her bedroom, and found her droid shut off. He decided to scope the whole place out before he turned it back on. He slipped down onto the veranda and quickly saw the scorch marks where the droid had tried to kill the senator. Other than that, no evidence that another person had been there. He crept up back into the main area and wondered if he could find something to eat.

He entered the kitchen, opened up one of the cabinets, and suddenly whirled around to find... oh, great. Another gorgeous woman pointing a gun at him. Wait a second — she looked scarily like the senator. She had more pronounced features, such as her cheekbones, and she was a little taller and more slender overall. Her hair was also lighter, redder, and contained blond highlights.

She wore the same angry expression as the senator, though.

“Who the hell are you?” she shouted, not moving her gun from Jix’s face.

Was this the assassin? She certainly didn’t look like it.

“You first,” Jix said.

“I don’t think so,” she growled. ‘A strange man, breaking into a senator’s apartment. I actually have a key.’ She held up a keycard. “Tell me where Padme is and what you’re doing here.”

Jix held up his hands. This was no assassin. “Whoa, whoa, hold it. Wait. Look, see?” He held out his gun and dropped it, kicking it away. “I’m unarmed.”

“Somehow I doubt that. Now tell me what the stang is going on before I shoot off your head! What the hell are you doing here, and where’s Padme?”

Jix gritted his teeth. Stars, she was gorgeous, but crazy. Why did Vader continually torment him with missions like this? To be fair to the girl, she probably did have the right to be a little nervous, since a strange (not to mention ruggedly handsome, if he did say so himself) man was in her apartment. Then again, it wasn't even really her apartment. All right, she was going a little overboard. He had to explain quick before she shot him between the eyes... or worse... somewhere lower.

Jix repressed a shudder and said, "Look, lady, I'm not here to hurt you. I didn't know it was you. I thought you were someone else."

"You're not making any sense."

"Fine. I'm a friend of Senator Amidala's." Stang, what was her first name? "Padme's."

"I doubt that, too," sneered the woman. "Where is she?"

"She's somewhere safe. I know this looks bad, but your friend is in a lot of trouble, and not from me. She's been targeted by an assassin, so I had to move her someplace safe."

"You're not explaining this very well," growled the woman. "What the kriff are you talking about? Who are you?"

"My name's Jix. I work for the guy who's got Padme in a safe place."

"Who?"

Jix hesitated; but then again, Vader had never told him not to tell. "Darth Vader."

The woman let out a laugh. "Sure." When his expression didn't change, her eyes narrowed. "Are you serious?"

"Completely. Look, you can talk to Padme if you want, but not here. I know you have a saferoom in this place — let's go there and we'll talk, all right? We just gotta stay outta sight."

The woman hesitated. "Fine. Just don't try anything."

Jix couldn't help it, he let out a deep laugh. "Lady, you have no idea what you've gotten yourself into." With one swift move, he'd disarmed her and had her backed up against the opposite wall with her gun at her throat. "Now, I'm not gonna hurt you. Now, if you don't mind, let's get mov—"

He choked, coughed as she grinned and kneed him in the groin. He stumbled back, sinking down, and glared up at her. "Kriffing stars, woman," he gasped, watching as she took back her gun and pointed it at him.

"I told you not to try anything," the woman warned him. "Now give me answers... or I shoot you where it hurts." The gun went down to his groin.

Jix glared at her. "I want a raise."

Vader admittedly hadn't thought this plan out well.

He realized later that bringing Padme with him, although the safest thing for her, wasn't the easiest way to catch the assassin. Now, without her there, the hunter would quickly realize that the Senator had disappeared. But that meant the hunter had no target... unless, somehow, he discovered that Vader had been the one to take Padme away. Even if he did, there would be no way that he would penetrate Vader's fortress. The only man, in fact, who had ever done so, was, regrettably Jix.

He shook out his wet hair and ran a hand over his freshly shaven jaw, staring at himself in the mirror.

Why had he brought her here? Was it really just to protect her... or something else?

He snorted and shook his head. She had no idea what she was doing to him, the amount of stress and frustration she'd brought into his previously simpler life. Now, with this bounty hunter on the loose after her, he was quickly realizing that bringing her here might not have been the wisest decision, both for her and himself.

What they needed was a way to smoke out the bounty hunter. If she'd stayed in her apartment, the hunter would've attacked again, making it much easier for Vader to find him. But now it would be much more difficult. The only trail they had was the droid, and that was no use to them. What he needed was a motive. But then again, Padme probably had many political enemies... for all he knew, the Emperor himself had ordered the hit.

Vader's jaw clenched, and he flexed his prosthetic hand. He couldn't let anything happen to her.

Feeling a sudden urge to see her, he grabbed his helmet, shoved onto his head, and strode out of his room. But she wasn't in hers. He searched the palace until he found her sitting all alone in the dining room, mindlessly stirring a hot drink with a spoon. She was dressed in women's clothing now, a simple but beautiful dress. But she didn't look happy.

However, when he entered the room, she blinked, and her face lit up. "Hello, Pilot!" She cast him a dazzling smile. "Didn't think I'd see you today."

"I have been occupied," said he, placing his hands on the back of a chair. "And yourself? How are you accomodating?"

She shrugged, but he could see the light leave her eyes. "It's been fine. I mean, I miss going outside... and doing my job, obviously."

"Speaking of which, I have several reports that need your concern," he said, and moved over to her and handed her a datapad, which she took eagerly. "Several diplomatic issues that require some attention, should you feel up to the task."

She grinned up at him. "I was born ready, Pilot." She pushed her food away and immediately started looking through the reports. "Mmm-hmm... mmm-hmm... hmm, interesting," she was muttering to herself, and pushed back a stray curl. It didn't stay back.

Vader's fingers itched to touch her. He resisted, but she looked so beautiful...

His inner resolve strengthened as he felt dark self-loathing rising up in himself. He turned away, cursing himself, but halted when she inquired if he were all right.

He nodded stiffly, turned back to her. "I have business to attend to," he found himself saying, and turned once again to leave. However, to his surprise, something hit him in the back. He paused, whirled around, and glanced down. A piece of bread. Wait. He looked up at her and found her with a small smirk, an upturned chin, and an arched dark eyebrow.

"Did you just..." He trailed off.

"Hit you with a piece of bread? Yes." She seemed quite proud of the fact. 'Now, you promised you'd spend more time with me, and I'm holding you to that.' She straightened and rose to her feet. "I—"

Vader's comlink beeped suddenly, and he inwardly cursed. "Excuse me for a moment," he said, and turned on the comlink. "What is it?" he all but growled.

"ALL RIGHT, WHO THE KRIFF IS THIS?"

Vader stared at the machine, startled, and Padme let out a gasp. Vader looked up at her.

"YOU HEARD ME! IS THIS DARTH VADER?" a woman's voice shouted into the comlink.

Padme's mouth fell open. "*Sabe*?" she gasped.

The room fell silent for a moment. Then, the woman on the other end cried, "Padme? Is that you?"

There was the sound of a scuffle, and then Jix's voice growled, "Would you shut up? I'm trying to contact them. Uncle Dee, you copy?"

"Jixton," Vader said darkly, "Explain what is going on. *Now*."

"Yeah, I'm going to, I just—"

"JUST SHUT UP AND GIVE ME THE DAMN THING!" the woman with Jix yelled.

Vader and Padme exchanged glances; and the sound of a scuffle could be heard from the other end.

"Enough," Vader thundered. "Jix, you were supposed to have the situation under control."

"I'm — argh — trying —" Jix grunted. "Will you just -ugh— STOP IT! HEY! Geez!"

"Ah-ha!" the woman crowed triumphantly. "Padme? Padme! Are you all right? Where are you? Don't tell me you're with Darth Vader, Padme, you're not!"

Padme rushed forward, snatched Vader's hand in her own and held the comlink near her. "Sabe? Where are you? What's going on?"

"Padme! You tell me!" Sabe exclaimed. "I come here to find a strange man invading your home! Now he's blabbing on about you being targeted by an assassin, him working for Darth Vader of all people, and you now staying with Darth kriffing Vader in his castle! Tell me the truth!"

"I'll kill him," Vader growled.

Padme licked her dry lips. "It's true, Sabe," she admitted.

"You're not serious!"

"She's serious!" they heard Jix snarl. "Now gimme back my comlink, woman!"

"Forget it, you blundering oaf! Padme! What the hell is going on?"

Padme rubbed her forehead. "It's a long story." She shot a weary glance to Vader and took a seat. 'I completely forgot,' she told him. "That is Sabe. She's a close friend, more like my sister. She was coming to stay for a while... and I forgot she'd be coming. She looks just like me — everyone thought we were twins. I didn't..." To Vader's surprise, he saw tears in her eyes.

"Padme!" Sabe said, sounding worried. "What's going on?"

Vader bent down, took Padme's quivering hand in his, and placed the comlink in her palm.

"This might take a while, just to let you know," she told him.

What she didn't know was that Vader was already formulating a plan, one that he knew she wouldn't like.

"Use her?" Padme had grown very pale. "As a decoy, you mean?"

Vader had expected as much when he suggested the idea. Well, more like told her. But after clearing up the situation with Padme's friend, Vader knew this decision would work. "Yes. She would be extremely helpful in finding this bounty hunter. Once he sees the senator has returned, he will undoubtedly attack again until his mission is accomplished."

"He'll kill her!" she cried.

"What am I, chopped bantha?" Jix demanded over the comlink.

"Jix will look after her," Vader promised. "He will not let her come to harm, I assure you."

Padme shook her head, her lips pursed. "No. I won't let her."

"Still here, Padme," Sabe spoke. "And listen..." She sighed. "Stang, never thought I'd be saying this... but I think Vader's right."

Padme's lips parted in astonishment, but she let her friend continue.

"Padme, I've been trained to do this for my whole life. What do you think I do for the Queen? I get shot at all the time, but I'm used to it. You don't think the Queen doesn't have enemies? Please," the handmaiden scoffed. "I can take care of myself, babe, you hear me? I don't even need this idiot's help."

"Excuse me?" Jix growled.

"Oh, shut up, you arrogant, stinking Corellian," Sabe snapped. "I don't need your help."

"Fine," Jix snarled. "Die for all I care. Uncle Dee, I'm out of here."

"No," said Vader and Padme together.

“You will stay with the handmaiden, despite her protests,” Vader ordered sharply. “You may need protection in the end, handmaiden,” he told her. “I am certain the senator agrees with me.” His helmet tilted towards Padme, who nodded.

“Yes,” Padme said seriously. “I do. I don’t want you alone there, Sabe... It’s not that I don’t have faith in you, or don’t trust you — but please, for my sake. If you won’t listen to me about being a decoy, then compromise. Have Jix there. It’ll make me feel better.” She held in her breath.

After a moment, the handmaiden sighed again. “Fine. But I’m doing this for you. And if he touches me, Vader, I’m personally castrating him.”

“That is your own business, of course,” Vader said dryly.

“You’re giving me a big raise, right?” growled Jix into the comlink.

Vader paused. “No.” Then, he reached down and cut off the connection.

The room was silent for a long pause, and Padme wouldn’t look at him. Vader drew his hand away and stepped back, knowing that she was even less happy with the situation now that her dear friend was involved. However, Vader was pleased with the sudden turn of events. Sabe provided the exact solution he needed.

“I didn’t want this,” Padme spoke quietly. “She’s my closest friend in the world. My only friend, really. Apart from you.”

Without another word, she rose to her feet and slipped out of the room, leaving Vader feeling more confused and frustrated than ever.

Padme couldn’t believe it. Not only was she stuck here, unable to do her job, but now her best friend had taken her place and was in danger at every moment. Although Sabe had willingly taken up the job, Padme couldn’t help but feel guilty and responsible for her friend. What if something happened to her? What if Jix wasn’t around? He couldn’t watch her every second.

Vader had tried to distract Padme with more reports and issues that needed to be resolved, but he still wasn’t around that often. Granted, he was practically running the whole Empire, so she had to give him leniency. Still... she was so lonely.

With Sabe now in her apartment and the events that had transpired, she’d completely forgotten that her sister was also en route to visit.

Alone with her muddled thoughts, Padme wandered the dark, empty corridors of Vader’s lonely, massive castle, glancing down at the datapad in her hands every so often. The reports that Vader had given her helped to take her mind off things, but it wasn’t as if she could actually go to the planet having the issue and talk with the leaders herself. She was still stuck here. And after nearly a week had passed, and Sabe hadn’t had any problems (other than fighting on a regular basis with Jix), Padme was beginning to feel desperate. Maybe the bounty hunter had given up after all.

But then, just as she was turning down another corridor, a set of doors facing her slid open, and Darth Vader stumbled through, clutching his arm.

Padme's mouth fell open; and she let out a gasp of "Vader!"

Vader froze, stared at her, as if uncertain. But before he could say anything, she rushed up to him and took his arm.

"You're injured! Force, what happened?"

"A slight miscalculation," he said angrily. "It will not happen again. A hired gun... bounty hunter."

Padme went cold. "He... he's after you now? He knows I'm with you?"

"I'm not sure as of yet. I will look into it. Padme," he said, "You are safe here. I swear it."

She nodded, biting her lip. She had to trust him. There was really nothing else she could do. Still... if the bounty hunter could attack Darth Vader, what else could he do? Could there be a way for him to get at her in the castle? But she couldn't think on this right now. She blinked, looked at his shoulder wound.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, sounding a tad bit sulky. "I simply need a bacta patch."

"You need a doctor — or at least a medi-droid!"

"I said I'm fine," he snapped. She pulled back, stung, and he sighed — or, at least, she thought he sighed. "I just need to fix this. It won't take long."

"Do you... need help?" Suddenly chilled, she rubbed her arms.

"No," he said. "But thank you." He nodded and stiffly turned down a corridor, disappearing through a doorway.

Padme didn't buy it. She rushed after him, following him through the door, and found him in what looked to be the medical center, pulling out several bacta patches. Blood was dripping onto the floor.

"You impossible man!" she sighed, shaking her head. Vader's helmet whirled to face her, but she ignored him, took the patch out of his hand, and peeled off the wrapper. 'Wait — you need to wipe it first.' She turned around, grabbed a cloth from the counter, and pressed it against his shoulder wound. "And could you sit down?"

Vader stepped back, leaned against a table. "Your sister was incorrect," he said after a long pause, as she wiped the blood from his shoulder. "Trickster is hardly an appropriate name. She should have called you—" He halted as she pressed the icy bacta patch onto his shoulder — "Your Highness."

Padme raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"You certainly like giving orders," he noted. "I didn't notice it before."

Padme smiled thinly. "Only when it's called for. But we both know we're stubborn. I—" She trailed off as Vader's comlink beeped suddenly, and looked down at his wrist.

“You need to go,” Vader warned. “I’m getting a call. You need to leave. Now.”

“But—”

“Padme,” Vader said forcefully, causing her to really look at him. He hardly said her name, and when he did, she paid attention. With his uninjured hand, he reached up and touched her shoulder. “You need to leave. I will not ask again.”

Padme nodded reluctantly. “All right.”

The comlink rang again, and she rose to her feet, picking up her dress, and hurried out of the room; but she paused and glanced back at him before letting the door shut behind her. Padme then waited restlessly outside the room, pacing back and forth, until Vader’s conversation was over. She didn’t hear anything — the thick, steel doors did their job, but she desperately wanted to. Who was calling? And why had Vader been injured? What if he’d passed out?

Padme shook her head and snorted. She couldn’t picture that.

But then, Vader came out, walking normally. He had patches on his shoulder and his leg, and he seemed more angry than ever. He also didn’t seem surprised that she was still there.

“What happened?” she asked hesitantly, struggling to keep up with his long strides as he stormed down the corridor.

“I am called away,” he said sharply. “A band of rebels on Metellos. I must stop the Rebellion before it grows any faster.”

“But you’re injured!”

“I’ll manage. I’ve had worse, believe me.”

She hurried at his side, entered the lift with him. He didn’t seem to care.

“You have to leave now, then?” she said, worried.

“Yes.” The lift stopped, and they exited together.

“But... what am I going to do? What if the hunter manages to find a way in? What if you... what if you die?” she blurted out. “You can’t leave me here alone!”

He paused, but didn’t stop. “I must, Smuggler.”

Padme didn’t want to panic, but she couldn’t help it. “No... this is insane. You were just injured! You’re not up to doing anything of the fighting kind... can’t you recuperate? Even just a few hours?” She reached out, grabbed his upper arm.

Vader now hesitated, turned to face her. She searched his blank mask for anything that could help her know what was running through his head; but she found herself lost and uncertain.

Then, he gently took her hand off his arm, grabbed her other hand, and took both in his, running his thumbs them. “I’m sorry, Padme. This was not supposed to happen.”

“You can’t leave me,” she whispered harshly. “I can’t lose you.” She struggled to hold back angry tears.

“You won’t,” he said firmly.

Padme tried one last time. “Please don’t go. Send someone else. I... I need you,” she breathed. She reached up with a hand, touched his mask, ran her fingers down its smooth edge. Emotions ran through her crazily, pouring out, overflowing from her pent up heart and mind. Everything over the past few days, weeks, came out. And, before she even really knew what she was doing, she was leaning up towards him. Her eyes slid shut.

She touched her lips to his mask, right where his mouth would be.

Vader’s loud breaths stopped.

Padme let her lips rest there for a moment before reluctantly pulling back, her eyes searching him again.

Vader stared at her, and his breathing started up again, uneven. He seemed to be fighting with himself internally. But just when she thought he would agree with her, he growled under his breath, said grimly, “I’m sorry, Padme.”

He turned sharply around and strode into the hangar bay, leaving her alone, breathing hard, and much warmer than a few seconds ago.

TBC...

If you liked the ending of this chapter, just wait till the next chapter... hee hee. :) Whups, don’t wanna give too much away, though. But it’s not going to be easy, just so you know. There’s a lot more to get through. Geez, I mean, this chapter was so long!

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

15. Rebel Rousing

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you all SO much! :)

***Note:** I'm totally thrilled you guys are liking the Sabe/Jix thing so far. I was kinda worried at first that people would be wondering why she isn't with Obi-Wan (and where IS that old fool in the first place?), but I've got other plans for the Jedi Master. :)*

Now, if you all enjoyed that last moment... you ain't seen nothin' yet. HEE. Wow, that didn't give too much away...

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Fifteen: Rebel Rousing

Sabe Verina knew three things.

One, her dearest friend was in grave danger.

Two, her dearest friend was currently under the protection of the most feared man in the galaxy.

Three, she was currently taking her friend's place in the Senate, so most likely, the assassin would come after her.

Four, which she hardly need add, she was forced to be in the presence of the most annoying, aggravating, crass, rude, arrogant, self-righteous, pig-headed man in the galaxy. The fact that he was Corellian said it all.

As she ran a brush through her hair, she didn't want to admit that she also found him extremely handsome — not that she'd ever admit it aloud, of course, and especially not to anyone, even to Padme. But he was. She'd always had a weakness for ripped, muscular guys... and with just a vest on, most of those muscles were revealed to her.

She just wished he had a better attitude to go along with that body and face.

Well, you can't have it all, she thought to herself with a sigh. After putting on some makeup, she straightened her clothes and entered the main lounge as Tee-Cee rolled in, looking less chipper than usual.

“They should be here soon,” Sabe told her, checking her hair in the mirror. “Just... act casual.”

“Right,” Tee-Cee said dully. “Casual. Pretend like nothing’s wrong. Pretend you’re Mistress Padme.”

“Look, if they don’t buy it, then we’re toast,” Sabe said grimly. “Hopefully they won’t know the difference. She pulled her hood up a little higher, made sure her curly wig was in place.” I hope we look enough alike to fool even her friends.”

“They’re not,” Tee-Cee stoutly. Sabe raised an eyebrow, and the droid continued, “They’re not her friends.”

“No?” Sabe eyed the droid carefully. “Maybe not. But you are.”

Tee-Cee nodded. “Yes. And I will, of course do anything to get her back. I just wish she’d taken me is all.”

Sabe never thought she’d be having a consolation conversation with a droid before, but she understood Padme’s love for all creatures, including droids, and knew the special relationship she had with her droid. She could also see that the droid, in its own way, cared for Padme, despite the fact that it was just a machine. Of course, she’d never say that to Padme.

Sabe smiled faintly, placed a hand on the droid’s thin upper arm. “We’ll get her back. That’s why it’s important we keep this cover.”

“Right,” said the droid, sounding oddly teary. “I’ll go get the drinks.”

Sabe watched as the droid rolled out of the room, then went over to the balcony and stepped outside, breathing in the cool air. Truthfully, she’d never felt this apprehensive about being a decoy. But her friend’s life was at stake — it was crucial for her to play along. The fact that she had agreed with Darth Vader of all people didn’t help to settle her nerves. And that bloody bodyguard of hers was unnerving enough...

“What the kreth are you doing?” A strong arm jerked her back into the apartment and whirled her around. Jix, and he looked furious. ‘Are you out of your kriffing mind, woman?’ he barked, slamming the glass door shut. “Are you trying to get yourself shot?”

Sabe angrily yanked her arm away, hissed, “I needed some air, hotshot. I told you I could handle myself, and I can. So, unless you want me to permanently render you incapable of having children...” She drew close, felt his hot breath on her face. “Don’t touch me like that again.” She stormed past him, ignoring the oddly tingling sensation in her stomach. She readjusted her hood, cleared her throat.

“You’re a piece of work, you know that?” Jix growled, folding his brawny arms over his well-toned chest.

Sabe looked at him through the mirror. “Speak for yourself. Working for Darth Vader, hm? Got to be a few screws loose there.”

Jix snorted. “Yeah, you’re one to talk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she demanded, turning to face him with flashing eyes.

"I just work for the guy," Jix said. "I'm not best friends with a girl who's living with him. Stang, I'd even go as far as say as I think she *likes* him."

Sabe's cheeks colored as he came up to her, but she didn't back down.

"So, before you start pointing fingers and accusing me of being Vader's head henchman," he said with a snort, then leaned in closer. "You might wanna start by looking at your own friends. And ask yourself — why would your friend be in Vader's castle, hm? What's in it for her?"

Sabe's hand instinctively flashed out, nearly caught his cheek. But he easily grabbed her wrist, halting her progress. A slow smile spread across his face, only making her more angry. That was it for her. While faking an attempt to pull her hand away, she lashed out with her other and punched him square in the jaw. He grunted, stumbled back, releasing her.

"Kriffing hells, woman!" he snarled, rubbing his jaw.

Sabe once again straightened her cloaked dress, gazed at him coolly. "Don't you dare talk about Padme like that again. Next time I won't let you off so easy."

They glared at each other, neither one moving. Finally, Sabe turned away, more flustered than she cared to admit.

"You can leave now. The Senators will be here soon. And you can't be seen."

After an uncomfortable pause, Jix muttered something under his breath and stormed off, disappearing towards the kitchen.

Sabe watched him leave, feeling triumphant and strangely upset all at once.

But she didn't have time for an emotional whirlwind, because the doorbell hummed a moment later. Capturing the essence of the dignified, proper Queen, Sabe schooled her features and waited as Tee-Cee greeted the guests and showed them in. She knew them all from being the Queen's decoy, and not all of them she liked. Well, actually, she really didn't like any one of them. Mon Mothma wasn't bad, but Bail was just a time bomb ticking more speedily every day. He had ambitions, and Sabe knew he would follow them.

Still, she greeted them all with a polite smile and a nod.

"Tee-Cee, could you get the drinks, please?" she asked her droid.

"I'd rather not," snarked the droid.

Sabe glared at her. Good grief, how did Padme put up with this? "Please," she gritted out.

"If I have to," the droid replied sulkily before wheeling off to the kitchen.

As he took his seat, Bail raised an eyebrow. "Still have that droid, do you?"

"You know I love her," Sabe said with a dry smile. "How've you been, Bail?"

"Well enough," said the Senator vaguely. "But I haven't seen you around in a while." He shot a knowing look to Mon Mothma, who smoothed out her dress and pretended she hadn't seen it.

A pause followed, and Sabe looked from Bail to Zang Far to Mothma. "All right," she said, "what's going on?"

Mothma opened her mouth, closed it, then glanced helplessly at Bail. "Padme... we hear you've been keeping some... strange company."

"Oh? From whom?"

"Well, sources around the Senate," said Mothma, looking flustered.

"Such as?"

"Well... Senator Breemu, for one," Mothma said.

Sabe snorted. "That little tramp is nothing but a gossip. I'd sooner trust a Corellian man than I would her."

The Senators all looked rather uncomfortable now, but Bail would not be put off.

"Padme, my dear," he said sternly, "We're simply worried about you. Keeping company with the likes of Darth Vader is not where you want to be right now."

"The likes of Darth Vader?" Sabe said airily. "I was under the impression that there was only one Darth Vader. If there are others like him, I think we'd know about him. That mask of his isn't something you see on everyone, now is it?"

Bail shot her an irritated look, knowing she was making a fool out of him. "Padme, this is not up for debate. You cannot keep seeing him. As your friend and mentor, I must insist that you stop seeing him."

Sabe forced herself to keep cool. The Queen had told her many times that her temper could get the best of her... but she honestly didn't know how Padme could be friends with these people. But, studying Bail closer, she noticed a strange countenance about him. He was hiding something, and he certainly wouldn't tell her anything if he thought she was friends with Darth Vader. She needed to find out what was going on.

"Excuse me for a minute, if you will," she said, rising. "I forgot to turn off the water in the bathroom, I think." She turned and disappeared into Padme's bedroom, but slid up against the wall separating her from the lounge. She'd left the door open, so she could hear everything. At first, there was silence, but then Bail started to speak in hushed tones.

"This is not part of the plan," Bail whispered harshly. "I don't know if we can trust her. She's so young, Mothma. She's flighty and naive. It might be too soon."

"She's trustworthy, Bail," Mothma argued. "Once we tell her, she'll see our side of things. She's not stupid, Bail. She's a smart young woman, one of the smartest senators I've seen come into the Senate in a long time."

"It's too risky," Bail hissed. "She is such a bleeding heart. She doesn't approve of violence."

Clearly, Sabe thought wryly, You don't know Padme at all.

"She knows what's right," Zar spoke up finally. "Whether or not she will approve of our actions is another matter."

“We did what we had to do,” Bail said. “He needs to be destroyed. That is our first priority. The rest will follow. We’ve already hundreds of Rebellion defects joining our new coalition. They know what we have to do.”

“You know I don’t approve of this, Bail,” Mothma whispered urgently. “Planning terrorist attacks on Metellos, a city planet almost as important as Coruscant is bad enough — but hiring *him*?”

“He’s the best,” Bail snapped in a heated mutter. “There’s no other choice. He has no loyalties.”

“Exactly! Bail, he’s a bounty hunter!”

What? What the kriff are they talking about? Sabe held her breath.

“Fett is the man for the job,” Bail growled. “He will kill Vader. I’m sure of it. And once Vader is dead, our new Rebel organization will rise up over the corrupt, weak-minded Rebellion in place now. It’s the only way to ensure peace. You know this, Mothma. You signed up for it. It’s too late to turn back now.”

Sabe’s eyes widened. She had to tell Padme about this. She rose to her feet, then heard a small cough behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Jix looking at her from the shadows, a grim expression on his face. He’d heard everything, too. She shot him a dark look. This wasn’t good. Bail, the sneaky son of a Sith, was planning something big. He was more self-serving and dangerous than she’d imagined. Hiring a bounty hunter to go after Vader? Starting a new Rebellion, a terrorist organization, to replace the current Rebel Alliance?

This wasn’t good.

Padme hadn’t slept for the four days that Vader had been gone. She tossed and turned restlessly in her bed, struggling to figure out why exactly was she feeling like this. If only Sabe were here... talking was so much better in person; and Sabe was far too busy to be discussing something like this with her at this time. Sabe had her own problems to worry about. Well, problems caused by Padme.

Padme groaned, rubbed her temples, and slipped out of bed. She should never had agreed to drag her best friend into this. If only Sabe hadn’t agreed with Vader... But it was too late now. How would she have known that Padme would be getting attacked by assassins? Everything had been fine until that fateful day...

Padme remembered the light touch of Vader’s bare hand on her skin and shivered.

Wait. No. No. This was wrong. Very wrong. Padme growled despite herself and started pacing the halls. This was ridiculous. She knew she’d been playing with fire the first night she came into contact with Vader, but she certainly hadn’t expected to keep running into him. And she most definitely did not expect to become friends with him...

And maybe more.

Force, she didn’t know what she was feeling anymore. She was so confused. If only she could talk to Sabe...

“Oh, *KRIFF!*”

Padme’s abrupt, horrified shout echoed throughout the empty, dark corridors.

She’d completely forgotten that her sister was also planning to stop by for a while. But of course her sister would know Sabe from her! Sola was her sister, for Force’s sake — she could obviously tell the difference! And if Padme was in danger, and Sola knew the truth, how could Jix protect her as well? What if the assassin used Sola for leverage against her?

Oh, bloody kriff — this was officially a disaster. She needed to talk to Sabe — fast.

She scrambled back to her room, grabbed her comlink. As she did so, the comlink started to beep. Startled, she nearly dropped it but managed to retain her hold on it. She turned it on, breathlessly saying, “Hello?”

“Padme, it’s me,” Sabe said.

“Sabe, thank the Force! I need to talk to you — there’s something—”

“Hang on, before you say anything, Padme, you need to know something,” Sabe interrupted. “Listen, I’ve just had a meeting with your Senator friends, including Bail Organa.”

Padme felt her heart drop. “Did he tell the difference?” she asked anxiously.

“No, no, nothing like that,” Sabe assured her hastily. “But listen... you know that your friends are part of the Rebel Alliance.”

“I’ve suspected as much, yes,” Padme admitted. “So?”

“Well, I’ve got some bad news. It seems your dear mentor thinks that the Alliance is a bunch of wimps. Basically, he’s trying to start his own coalition... a new Rebel Alliance. One that’s more like a terrorist organization than anything else, that doesn’t care about innocent civilians. He’s going to do whatever it takes.”

Padme blinked. “What?”

“Yeah. Haven’t even gotten to the good part. Padme, he’s hired the bounty hunter Boba Fett.”

“A bounty hunter! Is he out of his mind!”

“No, just another greedy, ambitious politician. Padme, he’s hired Fett to go after Imperial officials... namely Darth Vader.”

Padme’s mouth fell open. Surely Fett wouldn’t be able to stand up against Vader... after all, Vader had Force powers. But Fett was known to have taken even the best of Jedi Masters down. What if... what if Vader couldn’t stand up to him? He was already injured!

“I overheard Bail say that he planned terrorist attacks on Metellos,” Sabe continued grimly. “He’s going all out.”

Metellos. Why did that name ring in Padme’s memory? Where had she heard... Oh, no.

“Oh, stang,” Padme gasped. “Sabe — it’s a trap.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Vader — he’s walking into a trap. He just left a few days ago, told me he had to go to Metellos to squash a Rebel force there. But I don’t think he knows about this! What if Fett’s there, waiting to ambush him? Oh, Force, what if something happens to him?” She was more rambling out her own worries to herself than to Sabe. “He’s hurt — what if he’s ambushed?”

“Padme! Padme, calm down,” Sabe ordered. “You need to breathe. It’s Darth Vader. I’m sure he’ll be fine. He’s a smart man. He’ll be able to handle Bail’s forces.”

“But not if he’s injured!” Padme wailed. “I need to contact him!”

“No need, Brown Eyes,” spoke Jix’s rough voice over Sabe’s com. “I got it covered. You just stay put, all right? Don’t go anywhere. You still got someone after you, too.”

Padme nodded, feeling miserable. “Right. Yeah. OK. No, no wait!” she cried. “Sabe — I almost forgot — my sister, she’s coming to stay with me — you!”

“What?” Sabe said edgily. “When?”

“I don’t know — she told me within a few days — a week or so. She should be there any day. Oh, kriff, I completely forgot about it! And you know her — I told her this wasn’t a good time — and that was even before I was attacked! Sabe, she’ll know you’re not me! She’s the only one who can tell us apart! And what if she spills your identity to someone?”

“More importantly,” she heard Jix say, “what if someone decides to use her as bait? We can’t keep her locked up in here. If she’s your sister, it’ll be easy for anyone to see you two look alike. I’m sure the hunter will be watching your place, Brown Eyes. You need to tell your sister not to come.”

“You don’t understand,” Padme said, frustrated, “If she knows I’m in danger, she’ll try to come even more to watch out for me. I can’t stop her from coming.”

“Listen, woman,” Jix growled, “You need to grow up and look around you. If you want your sister to die, then by all means, lie down and roll over like a dog, but it’s not my problem.”

Padme’s eyes widened. Her mouth dropped when she heard the sound of a scuffle through the com.

“Don’t you dare talk to her like that,” Sabe snarled viciously. “I swear, you bulked-up buffoon, I will hack you to pieces if you don’t watch your wise-guy attitude.”

“Damn it, woman! Do you *want* me to tie you up for the rest of this mission?” Jix roared furiously.

“I’d like to see you try, and I’d like even more to see you fail miserably,” Sabe said archly. “I’m sure you’d like nothing better to tie me up, you depraved, perverted Corellian slime-dog, but that’s not going to happen. Now, if you call me or Padme ‘woman’ again, I will hurt you.”

“You got no stinkin’ idea, lady,” Jix hissed. “You got no idea what you’re into. You think this is all some kinda game? Not to burst your bubble, chick, but you’re gonna get yourself killed by an assassin if you don’t do what I say, and so is your little brown-eyed friend there,

and so is her stinkin' sister, too. You all wanna die? Be my guest. At least it'll get you off my back. If not, then shut up and follow my orders."

Padme stared silently at the com, dreading what her friend would say. Despite Jix's brusque, less-than-refined manner, he did have a good point. This was not a game. Bail's betrayal and the attack on herself and Vader proved that.

So why did it seem like someone was controlling the chess board?

Xizor was not pleased. It had been days now, and Fett had not gotten back to him. He should've been reporting by now. He watched Senator Amidala speaking to the delegates, a clip from about a month ago. Her brown eyes glittered with passion and determination as she spoke her cause. Headstrong, a bit dreamy, but he didn't care. Naive, dreamy women were easier to seduce, but that spark of passion made her more exciting.

Now, where was that blasted bounty hunter?

He contacted Fett. "You'd better have progress," he said coolly.

"I told you I'd contact you," Fett grumbled. "I told you I'd get her."

"Well, you haven't delivered on your promise, yet, now have you?" Xizor said icily. "Why haven't you taken her yet?"

"She's got a bodyguard. All her windows are laser-proof. It's harder than it looks," Fett snapped.

"You're supposed to be the best. This is your job. So get her, stop complaining, and bring her here. Or believe me, I will find another to replace you if I don't get results soon."

"Well, then, maybe you can figure out a little mystery for me," Fett drawled.

"What are you talking about?" Xizor demanded, glaring at the com.

"Who drives a black, custom built, T-460 airspeeder with dual subengines?"

What kind of a question was that?

"How should I know?" Xizor hissed, growing angrier by the second. "You're supposed to be finding her, not quizzing me on who owns which elite, custom-built speeder in Coruscant. I cannot believe I ever hired you. Consider yourself fi—"

"I've located the Senator," Fett growled into his earpiece.

Xizor paused, leaned forward. All right, fine. He'd play the hunter's game... for now. But he would make sure Fett would pay dearly for this. Shame. Fett was such a good hunter. But things were the way they had to be, and there was really nothing else to be done. He'd have to find someone else.

"Then where is she?" Xizor demanded in a low voice.

Fett sounded oddly smug and stupefied at once. "In the castle and company of the owner of that custom-designed airspeeder."

“Fett, I warn you, I —” Xizor trailed off as memories came flooding back into his brain. Memories of parties, of balls, dinners... always seeing Vader leave before everyone else because he detested the meetings so much... And he’d always left in a *custom-built T-460 airspeeder*. ‘Fett,’ Xizor said with a calmness he did not feel, “You mean to tell me that *Darth Vader* has the Senator Amidala.”

“Unless there’s another castle the size of yours on Coruscant,” Fett said dryly. “I wasn’t sure it was him until I dug a little deeper. Also, another client of mine just ordered a hit on Vader. I nearly got him, but when he saw me, I knew I couldn’t take him then. But he left in the same airspeeder.”

Interesting... Xizor rubbed his jawline. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me the name of your client who wishes Vader dead.”

“No.”

“Hmm. I thought as much. However, this intrigues me. What could a man like Vader possibly want with Senator Amidala?”

“Like I care,” Fett said. “But now that Vader’s got ’er, my price has just tripled. Going into that castle is suicide.”

But Xizor wasn’t listening to him anymore. Out of all the things he’d planned for, this scenario had not been one of them. His coloring grew warm with anger, and his fingers gripped his chair tightly. So, it was true. Vader and the Senator were more than simple acquaintances, or friends, for that matter. But Vader wasn’t a soft romantic. Either he was using the Senator for personal reasons, purely lustful reasons, or there was something in it for Vader. Something to be gained.

But what? There was a larger game afoot, he could tell. Vader was planning something... something against him.

First things first. He had to get Senator Amidala out of that castle. But it was impossible to get inside. So how to draw her out? With Vader there, he had no chance of stealing her away. Fett couldn’t even kill Vader outside his castle, much less inside. No, there had to be a better way...

He suddenly smiled. He had an idea. He cut off the connection with Fett and turned to his loyal servant.

“Find out who’s impersonating the Senator,” Xizor told Guri. “Then find out if the Senator has any relatives, and, if so, their locations.”

Guri bowed and noiselessly crept out of the room. Xizor leaned back in his chair, satisfied. The little senator wouldn’t be able to pass up the chance to save someone she cared about. Granted, it was an old trick, but old tricks generally worked. And if she didn’t have relatives, which would be most unlikely, then he’d resort to another plan. He’d call out the senator’s impostor, and Amidala would have no choice but to step forward. When that happened, once she stepped foot outside Vader’s castle walls... he would have her.

And he would use that to utterly destroy Darth Vader.

For right now, he was just curious as to who would hire Fett to destroy Vader for him. Fett was the priciest hunter out there.

Who else had dared to enter this game without his permission?

Sabe furiously brushed out her real hair as the city lights glittered into her -Padme's — darkened bedroom. Wearing a simple long nightgown, she stared at herself and wiped the makeup off her face, letting out a sigh. She ran an agitated hand through her untamed hair and shook her head. How was she supposed to survive if she couldn't even be remotely friendly with her own bloody bodyguard?

The truth of it was, Sabe had never been in this situation before. Usually, as decoy to the Queen, she'd have at least ten bodyguards around her at all time. Here, it was just her... and Jix.

Not very reassuring.

Force, did the man drive her crazy! Why couldn't he even *try* to be decent?

He'd be sleeping on the couch... or not sleeping at all. She'd actually never seen him sleep in the week that she'd been there. A little unnerving, but she supposed he slept somewhere she couldn't see. As she climbed into bed and let her hair down, she stared up at the ceiling. Oh, bother. This wouldn't do. Here she was, lying awake, thinking about Jix of all men.

Part of the reason she'd come here to see Padme was to tell her that someone had proposed to her, and she wasn't sure what to do. Naolan was a nice guy. Sweet, gentle, nice. Just so very utterly and completely nice. An average man, ordinary. A simple store manager. She'd met him in the market one day, and he seemed to like her so much, she started to see him. She didn't have much time for a social or personal life, but with him, she felt... well, boring. Like she didn't have the weight of the world on her shoulders.

She didn't want to admit that this mission had brought an excitement and life to her reality... one that she wasn't sure she wanted to let go. Padme's situation aside, something inside of her was struggling to get out, straining to uncurl and fly away.

But was it the mission? Or something else?

Feeling ashamed, she growled, threw off her covers, and padded into the kitchen. It was dark and quiet as she opened the fridge and pulled out a roll of cookie dough and jurii juice. As she turned to get a glass, she nearly crashed into Jix, who was standing far too close. She didn't cry out, just stiffened and glared at him. But to her surprise, his hard blue eyes were softer.

"Look," he rumbled, "Can we call a truce? This isn't working for me."

Sabe slipped past him, ignoring his tempting body heat, and set down the glass, opening up the cupboard. "We need terms first."

He snorted. "You are not an easy woman. But fine. I'll stop dissing Brown Eyes, and you stop threatening to castrate me, cut me up, and slaughter me, or hurt me in any way. How's that?"

Sabe turned around. "Fine."

He held out a hand. "Deal, then."

Sabe hesitantly shook his hand, inwardly screaming in protest as her cheeks warmed as his large, rough hand closed over hers. After an awkward pause, she pulled her hand away and turned back to the juice. To her irritation, he moved up beside her and ripped the cookie dough roll open. "Hey, that was mine!"

He ripped off a chunk and popped a piece into his mouth, holding out the roll to her. "We'll share."

She sighed. "Fine." She lifted herself up onto the counter and pulled off a piece of the dough, chewing slowly. Jix, meanwhile, leaned back against the counter beside her. They ate in silence for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts, until Sabe held out her glass to him. "Want some?"

He glanced at her, surprised. "You really want to share my germs?"

"I don't care," she said with a shrug. "Don't take it if you don't want to."

"Nah, thanks." He took the glass and took a swig of the drink. "Not bad. A little better than that bantha piss I had to drink back on Carrida." His eyes glittered humorously, daring her to gasp at his language.

But Sabe just grinned and shook her head. She took the glass back from him and took another sip. "You think you had it bad? Just try drinking *gorra gorra* melon juice. Tastes like Hutt slime. Looks like it, too," she said.

The two broke into laughter.

Padme honestly had no idea what to do anymore. She paced her room like a wild nexu, feeling as though she would drive herself insane. Was it... was it supposed to feel like this? Like there was a sharp ache in her chest that wouldn't go away? Was she supposed to feel this bloody confused? She'd always thought it was supposed to be like in the romance holodramas she watched all the time... Simple. Passionate. Warm.

He had to be back soon. He just had to.

Padme moved out onto the multi-shielded balcony, completely protected by a shield generator hidden into the back wall. It was nighttime, too, and the castle and its surroundings were too dark for anyone to see her. Very few lights surrounded the castle. No one would even know she was outside at this time. Weary and upset, Padme closed her eyes and felt the cool breeze against her cheek.

She never heard him step onto the balcony. Never saw him hesitate.

But when she felt his hand touch her shoulder, heard his voice rumble, "Padme," she opened her eyes and turned around, eyes widening.

"You're all right!" she gasped, gazing up at him. "Oh, thank goodness. I wasn't sure... I didn't want to think that you..." She paused, suddenly embarrassed.

"I'm fine," he told her, grasping her hand. His breathing quieted. "I'm fine, Padme."

Her breath caught. What was that strange note she detected in his voice?

Then, shocking her completely, he pulled his hand away and tugged off his glove. With his bare hand, he reached up to her face. His thumb brushed her cheek, slid down to her lips, resting there for a moment.

"Padme," he said quietly, "Close your eyes."

Padme didn't dare to hope... But she let her eyes slide closed.

Then, to her astonishment, she heard the sound of a snap, hiss, and the sound of something coming apart. Was it... was it his helmet? Was he taking off his helmet? She bit her lip in anticipation, felt her heart rate rise. His hand slid back to her cheek, caressed it gently, then moved down to her neck, cupping her jaw tenderly.

Then she heard a clank on the ground as his helmet dropped to the ground.

Force... she thought, right before all lucid thoughts flew out of her head. All there was left to do was feel. Only feel.

She felt him move closer. Felt his warmth surround her as he bent down towards her. Felt his hot breath on her face.

"Padme," he whispered. A *real* voice. A real, deep, male voice, unhidden by a vocal synthesizer. Although it was only a whisper, it sent hot jolts up through her spine.

Then, her breath hitched as his lips hovered mere inches from her own. Before she could breathe, his warm lips pressed up against her own. They remained soft, gentle, for a moment. Neither one moved an inch, almost afraid that if they did, this would all disappear... that this never would have happened. Padme felt as though she could sense his hesitancy, that, like her, he didn't know if she would pull away and remember just who he was, that she would wake up.

But she didn't pull away. She was already awake.

It was as if a spark had been set off, triggering him into action. His lips ceased to be gentle, his touch ceased to be light. In the next second, Padme found herself swimming in an ocean of emotions that she'd never felt before, causing her head to be light.

But while she was swimming, he, it seemed was drowning. He fully took her lips in his in a swift, almost harsh move that made her grab his shirt to steady herself. His mouth clashed against hers, captured it completely. His gloveless hand curled around to the back of her head, strong fingers burying themselves in her mass of dark tendrils. His gloved hand moved from her waist, down to her hip, then slid around to the small of her back, crushing her fully and wholly against him. She could feel the odd mechanical control panel against her stomach, but she didn't care at this point.

Vader coaxed her mouth open and now completely overwhelmed her senses. Something hidden, something repressed for her entire life, suddenly sprang to life, roaring up in a wild flame that overtook her control. She responded to his kiss fervently, passionately, and wound her arms around his neck, drawing him down even closer to her, if that were even possible. Her hands slid up the back of his neck, and she was inwardly pleased to hear a low growl

emanating from his throat. Her fingers touched the nape of his neck, then moved up through his thick hair...

She couldn't stop herself from smiling into his mouth. He had *hair*. He was *a real human being*. Not knowing if she would have this chance again, she ran her hands down through his hair (it was rather deliciously long) and then started a path around his neck to his face. As he savagely continued to assault her mouth, in her dizzy, blissful haze, she touched his face. His smooth, toned cheekbones. His forehead. His eyebrows. Up to the bridge of his nose. To his eyes. She lightly ran her thumbs over his closed eyelids, gratified to know that there was something behind that empty mask.

She distantly wondered what color eyes he had.

It felt like forever before they finally broke apart, forehead to forehead. He was so warm, all around her, and she didn't want to leave his strong, protective embrace. But they couldn't stay out here for too much longer. Padme kept her eyes closed, listening to his ragged breathing, feeling his heaving chest. One of his hands came up and stroked her head. After a minute, he moved his head up and pressed a heated kiss to her forehead.

Padme was sure she'd never felt this safe or this... this *wanted*... this *loved* in her entire life.

She wasn't sure if he would break the quiet first, but when he didn't, she sighed, resting her head against his upper chest. She felt his heart beat, smiled.

"Here's your heart," she whispered.

A trill of pleasure shivered through her as she felt his chest rumble. He was laughing. A deep, low, vibrating chuckle.

"Yes," he murmured in that warm, deep timbre of his, so very different from that cold, mechanical voice. 'I have a heart.' His gloveless hand moved to capture one of hers, pressed it against his chest, right next to her face, over his heart. "*You are my heart, Padme,*" he told her quietly.

Padme. Not Smuggler. We're not pretending anymore. We're not playing make-believe. We're not fooling ourselves. This is real, she thought.

But Vader eventually sighed and slowly pulled away. She frowned, already wanting him near her again, and held back a sigh as his helmet sank back onto his face. His glove went back on, but he brushed her cheek once more. She opened her eyes, gazed up at him.

"We should go inside," he rumbled. 'We've been out here too long.' He placed a hand on the small of her back and escorted her inside, leading her all the way back to her room. He paused, glanced down at her. "Goodnight, Padme."

"Goodnight," she told him softly, pausing one moment before turning and entering her room. She collapsed on her bed and stared up at the ceiling, breathless.

Yes, she thought blearily, still basking in the afterglow of their encounter. This was what it was supposed to be like.

I love him, she thought. *I really, really love him.*

TBC...

EEE hee hee. Yup. You can tell I had a lot of fun with that. Whew! Some chapter... don't think I've ever written a scene like that.

Just so you know, you guys will probably hate me for the next chapter. After the next chapter, we'll start winding down towards the end. Well, I'm not sure if winding down is the appropriate term... more like the opposite, actually.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

16. Shattered Wishes

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you all SO much! :)

***Note:** Some of you were confused, I think, so let me clear it up. Padme did NOT open her eyes at all during the last scene. She did NOT see his face.*

OK, this is the BIG CHAPTER. The one where things really start to get going. We've had some fluff, and now more plotting. But, as you know, you can never have too much fluff. :D

ALSO!: I've recently realized that I'm going to have to make this story a bit longer than I previously thought... there's just too much to get into a few more chapters!

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Sixteen: Shattered Wishes

Padme dreamed again that night.

The air was hot, windy, and dry. Parched, she licked her crusty lips and held up a hand against the blazing sunlight. Sand swirled around her on the rolling, endless dunes, sweeping up into her face and causing her to pull her veil around her eyes to block the grainy onslaught. She turned her back from the sun — no, wait, suns: there were two — and moved her booted feet across the sand.

Where was she?

Her previous dream involving sand had ended up in a dark cavern, but she saw nothing resembling caves here. She was in the middle of an endless desert. She needed shade... and water. Nearly blinded by the light, she squinted and started to trudge through the sand, not knowing where she was going or why she was there. The suns beat against her back, her linen clothing doing nothing to protect her skin.

Just when she thought she might not make it, her foot caught on a rock, and she stumbled, tumbling forward to the ground. She lay face down for a moment, listening to the wind, when, suddenly, it died down, and silence rang in her ears.

Thump thump thump. Thump thump thump thump.

What was that... footsteps? Padme slowly lifted her head, carefully opened her eyes.

“Ani!” she heard a female voice call from far away. “Ani, come back!”

Who was Ani? Where was that voice coming from?

Then, two smaller booted feet ran up right in front of her and halted. A shadow cast over her face, blocking the sun, and she dared to look up. There stood a boy, not older than ten years. His clothes were simple, his sandy blond hair falling into his eyes. Oh, his eyes! She froze with fear and awe all at once. She had seen those eyes before. They were the most intense, deeply colored ocean blue she’d ever seen. The boy gazed down at her with such a pensive, forceful gaze she almost had to look away.

But she didn’t.

Finally he spoke. “Are you an angel?” he asked very seriously.

Padme stared at him, speechless. After a minute, she swallowed and found her voice. “I... I don’t think so,” she rasped.

The boy’s eyes gleamed, and he leaned down closer to her. Padme gasped as the boy shifted into a familiar, darkly clad man, his body shadowed against the sun. One of his hands came up — a metal hand — and reached down towards her face. She tried to jerk away, but something stopped her. She felt pulled into a frozen position, one she couldn’t escape even if she tried. That metal hand brushed against her cheek, causing her to shiver violently.

Then, all of a sudden, his eyes grew strangely somber... full of something she’d never seen. Longing.

“You are an angel,” he whispered, and leaned down towards her. His breath was hot and oddly familiar against her skin, the movements of his hand a familiar caress against her hair and cheek. But just before his lips brushed hers, just before his eyes closed... Padme saw a flash of red-gold fire in his eyes.

She cried out wildly —

And bolted upright in her bed, gasping and shaking. She ran a trembling hand through her messy curls, stared into the darkness, fearing that he was waiting for her...

Only a dream, Padme. Only a dream. She chanted that to herself, but it didn’t quite work. And for the rest of the night, she remained wide awake.

Oh, kriff!

Sabe shut off the water and snatched a nearby bathrobe, wrapping it around herself as she hopped out of the shower. Her hair still dripping, she cursed under her breath and shouted, “TEE-CEE! COULD YOU SHUT OFF THE OVEN PLEASE?” She’d completely forgotten that she’d been cooking something for her next Senate meeting, and it was probably burnt to a crisp by now.

But the droid did not reply.

“Stang, where is that droid when you need her?” Sabe growled to herself as she dashed across the lounge and into the kitchen, only to barely avoid crashing into Jix. She stumbled back, and he caught her arm to steady her. “What are you doing?” she said breathlessly.

Jix stared at her with a strangely dark gaze, and she halted dumbly. She then looked down at herself and realized that although she was quite covered, being caught in a bathrobe wasn’t exactly standard clothing for guests. Not that he was a guest, more like a pest, she thought, but soon enough most of those thoughts flew right out the window when she caught his gaze.

Sabe could honestly say she’d never had a man look at her like that before. Not that she wasn’t beautiful or didn’t have men admire her, but she’d never see so much raw *heat* in those dark, expressive eyes of his. Out of habit, she stiffened and cleared her throat. “Uh, you mind?”

“Not at all,” said Jix, his gaze flickering to her long, lean neck.

Sabe forced herself to glare at him, annoyed at her reaction to him. “You keep staring at me and I’ll break our truce and whap you upside your head.”

Jix shot her a grin. “Sorry, Red. But you can’t blame me for lookin’ at a beautiful woman.” With a glitter of undisguised admiration in his eyes, he smirked and left the kitchen.

Sabe flushed and wondered why she wasn’t as angry as she’d thought. However, she suddenly groaned. “The oven!” She rushed over to the oven and yanked it open. But to her astonishment, it was empty and had already been turned off. Tee-Cee must’ve done it. But where was the food? She turned and saw the cake dessert lying on the counter, already covered and ready to go. She moved to inspect it when Tee-Cee rolled into the room.

“Oh, it appears as though I forgot to turn off the oven,” said the droid.

Sabe frowned. “What are you talking about? You already turned it off!”

Tee-Cee’s head turned towards the oven. “I didn’t turn it off.”

“You didn’t take out the cake?”

“No. Must have been magic,” drawled Tee-Cee before rolling out of the room.

Sabe raised an eyebrow and glanced down at the cake. Had Jix just done something *nice* for her? Or was she going insane and imagining the whole thing? Sabe took off a small piece of the cake and tasted it. Perfectly cooked. She shook her head and smiled. “You smug Sithspawn.” She placed the cover back on the cake and returned to the bedroom, pulling on a simple top and slim black, bootcut pants — something easy to move in as she practiced her standard martial arts routine. Then, the com rang. Frowning, she went over to the comlink hub and stopped still.

Oh no. No, no, no, NO!

The vid screen blinked to life, revealing a woman with dark brown hair and an annoyed expression. “Padme, let me in. I’m at your building, but they won’t let me in, even though I have ID. Could you come down here? It’s getting windy, and I felt a few drops coming down. Don’t make me wait all day. I am your older sister, after all.” The screen blinked black.

Sabe whirled around, snatching her comlink from the bed, and dashed out of the room, her heart pounding.

Jix knew something was wrong when he stepped out into the main sitting area. It was so quiet. Too quiet. He frowned as Tee-Cee rolled into the room, asked, “Where’s Sabe?”

“I don’t know. She should be in her room.”

The bedroom door was wide open. Jix, never the cautious one, stormed into the room. “Sabe? You in here?”

No answer. But then, the comscreen blinked on again to reveal a scowling woman similar to Padme. “Padme Amidala, what is going on? Answer this comlink now! I’ve been standing here for almost twenty minutes, and it’s getting colder! How can you let your only sister wait like this?”

Sister. Her sister was here, standing outside, unprotected. The absolute perfect target for a bounty hunter. She’d make an easy catch, which would force Padme (or Sabe, in this case) to come out looking for her.

Sabe...

“Kriffing woman!” Jix roared, and charged out of the apartment. “Gonna get herself killed!” He slammed a hand on the lift keypad and touched his wristcom on the way down, his heart pounding wildly. He didn’t know why he was so bloody anxious. Why hadn’t that kriffing woman told him? She could have at least shouted out what was going on. Was she *asking* to get shot at? What was that crazy red-head thinking? Well, clearly, she wasn’t.

Jix sprinted out into the lobby, just as the doors were opening to let Sabe through. Sabe flew through the front entrance, shouting to Padme’s sister, who was still waiting just outside. Sabe’s arms outstretched towards the sister —

“NO!” Jix roared, lunging after her. “SABE, DON’T!”

Just a second too late.

Shots rained down on Sabe and Padme’s sister, and Sabe shoved the woman to the ground, rolling on top of her to protect her. As Jix charged towards the door, Boba Fett alighted on the ground, aimed for Sabe —

Jix fired at Boba, but the hunter dodged to the side and fired on him. Jix rolled to the ground and fired again but missed. Sabe, in the meantime, jumped to her feet and whirled around to face the hunter, only to be met with a hard blow to the head. Jix fired again and caught the bounty hunter’s leg, and Fett cursed, snarled, and kicked Sabe to the ground. As Jix scrambled outside and grabbed for Fett, the bounty hunter yanked Sola to her feet and took off into the air, using his jetpack. Jix fired again at him, caught Fett’s side. The hunter’s flight path faltered, and he sank a little lower...

But just as Jix was about to shoot again, the hunter turned around and threw something at him.

Jix barely had time to register what it was before he leaped over to cover Sabe —
Then, his world went black as everything exploded.

Humming, Padme leisurely walked around the castle, barefooted and at times, twirling around like a four-year old girl. She still couldn't believe it. She'd actually *kissed Darth Vader*. Kissed him! Her! A nobody senator from a tiny planet, kissing him, one of the most powerful men in the entire galaxy! Well, now she knew he was an actual human man. And Force, could he *kiss*. Padme's toes curled, and she giggled lightly, spinning around the dark hall once more. She had kissed Lord Darth Vader... and she had immensely enjoyed it, too. In fact, she wouldn't mind kissing him again, preferably sooner than later.

Maybe... maybe one day he'd actually let her see his face. He obviously didn't need the mask to breathe... and he didn't appear to be deformed or horribly scarred.

So why the suit? Why the panel? These questions burned in her mind, but she'd take it slow. She still wasn't even sure what they were yet. Boyfriend and girlfriend? She snorted at the silliness of that wording. No, definitely not that. She supposed they were friends, as they weren't lovers. He'd never said he loved her, outright, and she hadn't told him. This was all very confusing, but Padme didn't want to go back to the way things were before. They had finally moved forward another step in their strange, wonderful, baffling relationship, and she certainly preferred it to fighting.

She wandered down another hall, one she hadn't been down before. It seemed more closed off, more hidden away. There were a few doorways, one larger than the others. Curious, she went up to it and pressed the keypad. Astonishingly, it was unlocked. Emboldened by her progress, Padme shot a quick look around and stepped inside.

It was... a bedroom. A very large bedroom, as a matter of fact. Like her own, it contained no windows. A large, luxurious bed was up against the wall to her right, and to the right of the bed was a doorway, probably to the 'fresher. There were several consoles, a holo-imager, and a dresser and a wardrobe. Although it was a massive bedroom, Padme's eyes locked on the top of the dresser, and she halted, her breath hitching.

Resting on the top of the dresser was Darth Vader's helmet.

This meant, of course, that she had found *Darth Vader's room*.

Her mind reeled; and before she knew it, she was walking over to the dresser and staring down at the mask, reaching for it. She picked it up, trembling, and gazed into its dark, empty eyeholes. Now, more than ever, did she wish she could see the face behind this mask.

A sound to her right caused her to whirl around in that direction. And to her surprise... and horror... she faced the man in question.

But not as she'd expected. Padme stared in horrifying realization as a half-dressed man stepped through the doorway and stopped short at the sight of her. His hand — his *metal, droid-like* hand — which had been running through his thick, dark blond hair, fell to his side, touching his only garment of clothing: black pants. Padme took him all in, her vision swimming.

The mask slipped from her hands and dropped to the floor with a thud. Neither spoke for a long, tense moment.

She couldn't believe it. He *was Anakin Starkiller. Anakin Starkiller was Darth Vader*. He'd been lying to her this entire time.

Against her will, she let out a half gasp, half choked sob, and swallowed. "You..." was all she could whisper. Her head felt suddenly light and dizzy, but she managed to maintain her balance. 'You... it's you.' She couldn't keep the emotions out of her voice. She swallowed again, her throat dry and aching. "You're... him."

His lips thinned, and those intense blue eyes whirled with stormy emotions. Used to the blank mask of Vader, she could hardly take his eyes at the moment, but at the same time, she couldn't look away, locked in an almost hypnotic pull.

"Padme," he said in that familiar deep, vibrating voice of his, 'listen to me.' He took a cautious step forward, reaching out a hand, palm facing her. It was his real hand, but she didn't care. In response, she stepped back, and he halted, eyes flaming with several emotions that she couldn't place. Disappointment? Anger? Frustration? "Padme, listen to me," he repeated in a low voice. "Let me explain."

But she'd finally found her voice. "Explain what?" she blurted out, blinking back horrified, angry tears. All of her feelings poured out in a dazed whirlwind, but she found that she was growing more hurt and angry than scared. "Explain how you lied to me? That you're... *Starkiller*? That you've been lying to my face this whole time? Lying about who you are?"

"That's not who I am, Padme," he told her forcefully, taking another step towards her, looking more certain now, and yet slightly more desperate. "Believe me, I—"

"Not who you are?" she interrupted, voice raising. "Who, exactly *are* you? I don't even know you who are anymore!" Sucking in a sharp breath, she turned around and swept towards the open door. She had to get out of here. She had to think... She had to find out just who she was dealing with now. Vader, she could handle. Vader, she could trust. Vader was safe. Starkiller was not any of those things. He was handsome, intense, deadly, and cruel. Starkiller both angered her and frightened her.

But as she reached the door, he dove for her, using his Force powers to telepathically shut the door before she could escape. As she skidded to a stop, placing her hands on the door to protect herself, she felt him right behind her. Growing more furious by the minute and determined not to show him that she was afraid, she turned and stared right up into his eyes. His bare chest heaved with emotion and sudden exertion, and his toned arms trapped her against the door.

"Padme," he said, "You need to listen to me."

"No," she snapped. "I don't. Let me go."

His eyes darkened, glittering down at her. Her lips pressed tightly together in defiance, and she held her head high.

"You know what I am, Senator," he growled. "I never pretended to be anything different. You fooled yourself into believing that I was some kind of *hero*, some *knight in shining*

armor ready to sweep you off your feet. You naive girl, did you honestly not see what I am?"

"Don't think I didn't know," Padme retorted sharply, her fingers clenching into fists. "I know exactly what you are."

"You stupid girl," he sneered. "You were too busy daydreaming about someone that does not exist. Don't think I didn't see it. But the time for pretending is over. This is who I am, Padme. Starkiller was just a name, someone who could say things and go places Vader could not undetected, but mask or no mask, I am no knight or some fairy tale prince. I am *a Sith Lord*. I am *Lord Darth Vader*."

Padme searched his cold face for any sign of the person she'd grown to love over the past few months but found nothing familiar. "I know what you are," she told him quietly. "But who you are is another matter altogether. You've shown me two different sides of the same coin, and I don't know which one is the real you. And don't think I couldn't see that you cared for me."

His expression grew suddenly hesitant, as if knowing she had something over him. Her confidence grew with his vulnerable uncertainty.

"Whether you admit it or not, you felt something for me," she continued boldly. "Why else would you continue to search me out? Why else would you become someone that Darth Vader is not? Your actions towards me have not been those of a cold-blooded killer."

His jaw flexed in irritation. "I like a warm body in my bed every now and then," he said coldly. "Beforehand interaction makes it more interesting."

"Cut the kriff," Padme retorted coolly. 'Now you're just making excuses. If you really just wanted me in your bed, you could've forced me anytime you wanted. You're Darth Vader, you can do whatever you want. You could've even killed me after, and no one could've done a thing.' Her chin tilted up. "You can still kill me. You can still rape me. You're stronger and more powerful than I am." Her heart pounding wildly, she moved closer to him, shifting away from the door until she was nearly touching him. She couldn't believe she was doing this. Was she mad?

"So do it," she goaded. "If you really don't care about me... if you really just want me in your bed... here's your chance. I don't have any hope of standing up to you."

Vader's gaze grew heated and black, wild and dangerous. He didn't look anywhere else but into her eyes. He seemed to be looking for something... searching her to see if she was really saying what she had just said. Padme thought she saw conflict, but she couldn't read him very well just yet. It grew quiet again in the room, the only sounds their harsh breathing and the whirring noise of his prosthetic hand as he clenched and unclenched his fist. A heavy, tense aura blanketed the room until Padme thought she might burst from his indecision. But she couldn't look away, and she wouldn't back down.

After what felt like agonizing centuries had passed... Vader abruptly pulled back and turned away from her, still breathing hard. Padme blinked several times as the air in front of her cleared, just to make sure he had really done that. Completely dumb, she gaped at him as his back muscles rippled as he reached up to run a hand through his hair.

After a few seconds, he still had not faced her. Padme jerked herself out of her stupor, pulled herself together, and touched the keypad. Without another word, she fled the room. It wasn't until she had reached her own quarters and locked herself inside that she discovered she was shaking.

But the question was... if he was Starkiller one minute and Vader the next... who was he?

Padme didn't know. She didn't know who this man was... this man that was ripping her heart to shreds. But she did know one thing: she couldn't stay here any longer. The bounty hunter could go to Hoth — she was leaving. She had to sort this all out. Maybe she'd go back to Naboo, talk things through with her parents. Or maybe she'd take a leave of absence, not tell anyone where she was, except maybe Sabe. She could go to the outer rim... maybe find a job, somewhere where she could just think.

She jumped when her com beeped. She stared at it, wondering for a moment if it was Vader... or whoever he was... but then, she realized he would've just knocked on her door. She picked up her comlink and answered it. "Hello?"

"Padme? Padme! Oh, stang," Sabe choked, rasping out sobs. "I'm so sorry — I'm so, so sorry!"

Padme went very cold. "Sabe, what happened?" she demanded.

"We were ambushed — I didn't think — it happened so fast — Jix! Stop it! It wasn't your fault!" Sabe cried.

Padme had never heard her friend more upset before, and it made her head dizzy. "Sabe! What's going on? Are you all right? What's wrong?"

"Your sister! Padme, he took your sister!"

Padme froze. "The... the bounty hunter?"

"Yes — Boba Fett, kriff him. Padme, I had no idea Sola would just show up at your door without a word... I tried to get down in time — tried to call her, but she didn't recognize my com number and wouldn't pick up... oh, Padme! I failed you."

"No!" Padme said forcefully. "It's not your fault. Not yours, not Jix's. Both of you are all right, yes?"

"Yes, fine. We got a little beat-up, but we're fine. We tried to follow him, but he threw a bomb, and we lost him."

Padme rubbed her forehead, sighed. "It's all right. We'll figure it out," she said bravely. "Listen, you should just stay put. I'll... I'll fix this."

"What are you talking about? I —" Sabe's voice faded as the comlink exchanged hands.

"Brown Eyes, you near Uncle Dee? I need to talk to him."

Padme stiffened. "No. I'm not."

"Uh, OK. You know where he is?"

“No,” she said flatly. “Listen, Jix. The bounty hunter took my sister for a reason — he, or his client, wants to use her to get to me. He won’t kill her. Just wait there, look after Sabe. I have to go.”

“What? Hey, wait!”

Padme hung up, clenched the comlink tightly. She hated doing that, but she knew what was going to happen within the next few days, and, she wagered that Vader would know, too. The bounty hunter, or his client, would contact Sabe, letting her know that he had her sister, and unless Sabe did as he asked, he would kill her sister. But Sabe would contact *her* directly after, letting her know what was going on. Sabe would have to meet the bounty hunter, or the client sometime.

And then, the hunter would kill Sabe, thinking she was Padme.

But Padme had another plan. One that didn’t involve anyone else she loved getting hurt. Sabe had done a wonderful job, but even she hadn’t been able to stop the bounty hunter — not that she blamed her, of course. But she didn’t want Sabe getting killed... or Jix getting killed, either. She was finished with being stuck in this dark castle with nothing to do and no way to live her life.

Padme grit her teeth, glared at the wall. She remembered a conversation she’d had with a certain dark lord a while back... something about destiny.

“Destiny,” she muttered darkly. “No. You *make* your own destiny.”

“Ah — ow.”

“Baby,” Jix muttered, touching one of her arms lightly while pulling out a piece of shrapnel from the other arm.

“I’m not a baby, you heartless buffoon.”

Jix glared up at her, paused, his hand hovering over her wounded arm. “Thought we talked about this, Red.”

“Oh, so you can call me a baby, and I —” Sabe winced and pressed the ice bottle closer to her head — “can’t call you anything back?”

Jix sighed. “Fine. We’ll call it even. Though I think heartless buffoon is a little worse than baby.”

“Maybe for you, baby,” she said with a humorous, dry note to her voice. Jix hesitated at her words, glanced up at her. Her fierce eyes were closed, and a pained expression brought tiredness to her tear-stained, bloodied and dirtied face. He knew she felt just as guilty about the situation as he did, probably even more so, considering how close Sabe and Padme were. But she shouldn’t feel guilty. It was the blasted sister’s fault for just showing up. And honestly, who did that?

“Baby, you finishing or what?” Sabe murmured wearily.

Did she realize how that sounded? Calling him a baby was one thing... but the way she *spoke* in that low voice of hers...

Apparently she did realize how that sounded, because she froze, opened her eyes, and reddened. "I didn't mean it... like that," she stammered, unusually uncertain of herself. She took the icepack off her head and stared at him.

"Yeah," he said, blinking himself out of his trance. 'Yeah, I know.' He forced himself to look away from her face and back to her arm. Most of the shrapnel was out, and the wounds just needed bacta patches. "Just a small piece left," he said, clearing his throat. "Just be still."

"Fine." She placed the ice-pack on her head, fell silent.

Jix was more gentle after that. As he placed the bacta patches on her arm and shoulder, he cleared his throat again. "She's right, you know. Brown Eyes. It's not your fault."

"Tell me this when we've got Sola back," Sabe said bitingly.

Jix sighed through his nose, took her chin in his hand. She opened her eyes, surprised. "Hey," he said. "We'll get her back, all right? We will."

Sabe's eyes softened, became watery. But she didn't cry. "How?" she murmured. "We don't know where Fett's taken her. We have no idea who his client is."

"We'll figure out something. Don't worry," he told her firmly, now cupping her face in his hands. Against his better judgment, he let his fingers run down her smooth skin to where her head and her ears met her long, swan-like neck. Sabe sighed, closed her eyes with a small frown, and leaned her head down, unconsciously towards him. Jix had no idea what he was doing, but somehow, within the next minute, he found his forehead pressing against hers. Her slender, firm hands had somehow made their way to his bare, dust-covered shoulders.

Frankly, they were both worn out, heavy-hearted, covered in ash, smoke, dust, blood, and bits from the detonator Fett had decided to send them as a parting gift, but they were alive. Right now, that was all that mattered.

TBC...

OK, now we're starting to see a little more of the kick-kriffing-butt Padme attitude coming out. I honestly think they didn't make her tough enough in any of the movies (in the third, she was pretty pathetic, sorry! I know she was pregnant, but still, she had no spine), and I tend to make her have more of a backbone in my stories. This was really the first I've written where she's really different.

But for all of you who like the 'Luna Lovegood' version of Padme, don't worry. She's still the same Padme as the start of the story... but with a lot more baggage and personal problems at this point. Never fear, though! I have a feeling the dreamy Padme is still in there, waiting to drift out very soon... ;)

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— *Serena*

17. Simply Sabe

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By Serena

A/N: You guys are the best! :)

Note: EDIT: Hey, guys, I'd like to apologize for the delay. I had to take down this chapter because for some reason, FF isn't saving my entire story, even when I click the save button. So I've had to go back a few times now and add in missing pieces. I sincerely apologize.

Wow, your response to that last chapter was so encouraging! :) If you like Sabe/Jix, you're going to LOVE this chapter. :D I'm a huge Jix fan, so any scene with him is always good. :D

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Seventeen: Simply Sabe

Sabe had finished showering off all the dust, blood, and ash, and was decidedly hungry. Momentarily ignoring the guilt gnawing away at her and the voices screaming inside her head that she could have, should have done more to save Sola from the hands of Boba Fett, she threw on a light, short dress and entered the kitchen. When she did, she stopped short at the sight of a shirtless Jixton, his tanned, dust and blood-covered back facing her. He let out a small hiss as he tried to pull some shrapnel out of his shoulder; and she realized with sudden anxiety that he had been even more injured in the blast than she had.

She'd just been too bloody wrapped up in her own bloody self to realize it. Another wave of guilt washed over her, and she swallowed and marched up to him. Lightly touching his injured back, she came up behind him. He stiffened and turned sharply to face her, relaxing when he saw her. His gaze swept over her quickly, and he gave a short, satisfied nod.

"You look better, Red. A little pale, but better."

"Better than you," she retorted. 'I didn't even notice. Kriff, I'm such an idiot.' She surveyed his torn shoulder. "You look bad."

He gave a hoarse, low laugh. "Thanks. And here I was just thinkin' of making a come-on to you."

Sabe let out a noise of disbelief, used to his quips by this point. "Jix, you've got blood running down your wounded back and you're thinking of hitting on me. You're insane."

“I think ‘dedicated’ works better,” he said with a grin. ‘Sides, I’ve had worse. Trust me.’ He glanced at his shoulder and shrugged. “It ain’t that bad. Lived through a lot worse. I work for Vader, remember?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Sabe said with a sigh. She took a cloth and moved over to the sink, running it under some hot water. She then came back up to him and dabbed the cloth on his shoulder before moving around to reach his back, targeting the blood trails first. “I guess I should consider myself a rare person to be speaking with someone working directly under the dark lord. Isn’t there a code for that kind of thing? Normally, I should think that you wouldn’t tell anyone who you work for.” She caught a bit of blood on his collarbone, slipped around back to face him.

“Well, you know that, and you know my name,” he said, his gaze glittering and dark. “I usually don’t let anyone know my name and live.”

Sabe stared up at him for a moment, then gave him a sly smirk. “I’m not just anyone, Jixton.”

Jix gazed at her, silent for a long minute. “No, Red. Don’t think you are.”

Feeling oddly shy, Sabe looked away. “I should finish...” She motioned to his shoulder.

“Yeah. Right.”

Sabe dabbed his shoulder and pressed her lips together, unsettled by his dark gaze that bored into her intently. She shouldn’t be this flustered; it was only Jix after all. But standing practically cheek to cheek with a half-naked man wasn’t something she did every day. She wasn’t used to his heat, his warm breath on her skin, and his sheer closeness.

She’d had boyfriends before — in fact, she had been seeing someone back on Naboo. But Naolan wasn’t exactly the prime candidate for a boyfriend. Oh, he was nice, he was cute, in a boyish sort of way, and he was overall a decent fellow, but just so... dull. When she kissed him, needless to say, she hadn’t been in a hurry to do it again. He smelled odd, too.

Why was it she seemed to be attracted to the bad boys? Well, boy was hardly the term for Jix — *rugged, strong man* was much more accurate. Licking her dry lips, Sabe held back a sigh and reached up to press the cloth to his shoulder —

“Aw, kriff it,” Jix muttered, and with one hand, reached behind her head, tugged her with a firm yet gentle grasp, and took her mouth in his own.

Sabe didn’t hesitate. Her eyes snapped shut, and the rag dropped to the floor. But when she slid her hands up his arms, his shoulders, her fingertips dancing up his slick, blood-covered skin, and then wound her arms around his neck, he ceased to be gentle. Barely giving her time to breathe, he let out a deep groan and kissed her again harder, deeper. She was overwhelmed by his heat, his chest heaving against hers, the feel of his rough, calloused lips plundering her own, his strong arms fully entrapping her to him. His long dark hair, usually kept in a loose pullback, came free as she ran her hands through his hair and tugged the hair-tie free. She buried her slim fingers in his dark strands and was satisfied to hear him hiss against her mouth.

She’d never felt this protected, this safe in her life. She was the decoy, the bodyguard, the protector. She’d been living with the fear hanging over her head of not knowing when the

next hit on her would come. But with Jix, she could be simply Sabe. Just a woman. She could be the one protected for one short moment. She didn't have to be anyone else.

Lack of air forced them to part, but he did not release her. Breathing heavily, they looked at each other, mere inches apart. His hands slid down the graceful column of her long neck before one moved down her arm, then around her waist before resting on the small of her back. Sabe let out a long breath, letting one of her hands lightly run over his injured back, then his shoulder. Then, surprising them both, she suddenly grinned.

"Oh, that's romantic," she breathed, "Cursing before you kiss me."

Jix grinned back, leaned in closer. "Didn't think you were the romantic type, Red."

"I'm not. Now kriffing kiss me and shut up," she whispered, and tugged him to meet her mouth again.

They pulled apart when Padme's comlink hub beeped. They stared at it for a moment, then looked back to each other. Sabe groaned, rested her forehead on Jix's chest. Jix sighed and stroked her back.

"We should probably get that," he muttered.

"Don't want to," Sabe grumbled. 'But you're right.' She slowly disentangled herself from him and walked over to the com. As she pressed the "answer call" button, Jix came up behind her and kissed her longingly on the neck. She grinned, tilted her head back to look up at him. However, they both froze when a silky smooth voice spoke over the comlink.

"Greetings," said a distinctive male voice. "I believe I have something you want back."

Sabe and Jix shot each other angered glances, pulled away from each other. Gritting her teeth, Sabe said coolly, "To whom am I speaking?"

The man chuckled. "Oh, I don't believe I will reveal myself to you, my dear impostor. I do not wish to discuss anything with *you*. I have some business that I wish to discuss with Senator Padme Amidala."

"You're speaking with her," Sabe said, forcing an even tone. "I am she."

"Oh, I think not. Well played, though, my dear. A valiant effort to assist your friend," said the man. "But enough pretending. I know you are not the Senator, because, in fact, I have it on good authority that she is currently in the *possession* of Lord Darth Vader."

Sabe glanced at Jix, horrified. She didn't think she'd seen him look so furious or shocked before. His strong jaw clenched, and his eyes darkened. He folded his brawny arms over his chest and glared down at the comlink. She knew he was frustrated to remain silent, but he didn't want to give anything about himself away.

"Listen, pal," Sabe said, "I'm Padme Amidala."

"Enough," hissed the man — or creature, as he didn't sound fully human. "You will tell your little friend to meet me on the fifth level, sector five, in the Underland Club. If she is not there by 2300 hours tonight, I will kill her sister. Do not attempt to bring along someone else or go yourself, or the consequences will be severe. This a game you cannot win, my little decoy. Surrender your friend, or you will cause the end of her sister's life."

The comlink connection dissipated immediately after he finished speaking.

Jix rammed a gloved fist into the table, letting out a growled swear. The table shook violently and splintered under his brutal force.

Padme stuffed another pair of pants into her pack and froze when she thought she heard footsteps coming towards her door. She listened in silence, her heart thumping wildly, but the footsteps passed by her door and continued on down the corridor. When everything was silent again, she let out a short sigh through her nose and sank down onto the bed.

She didn't know how much longer she could keep this up. It'd only been several hours, but every passing minute felt like a day. And she had honestly no idea what Vader would do to her at this point. Would he kill her, now that she'd seen his face? Force her to stay with him, lock her up here? Try to control her mind with his Force powers? She shivered at the thought and rose to her feet, snatching a dark scarf and scrunching it up in her hands before putting it in the sack.

She had to force herself not to shriek when her comlink beeped loudly in the stark quiet, but she did jump and whirl around, gasping. "Kriff," she whispered, paling. She dashed over to the nightstand, picked up the comlink. "Hello?"

"Padme, it's me," Sabe said grimly.

"Sabe, what's happened?"

"We've had a call from your attacker," her friend told her. "He wants you to meet him... or someone working for him, more likely, at the Underland Club in the fifth sector of level five. Tonight, by 2300 hours... Or he says he'll kill your sister."

Padme's hand gripped the comlink tightly. "OK... OK... Let me just..." She trailed off.

"Padme, I'm not finished. He knows I'm not you. And he knows that you're in Vader's castle."

What? How could he possibly know that? Had he seen Vader's ship leave her apartment? But how did he deduce that Sabe was not Padme? The switch had gone over splendidly, she'd thought. Well, it didn't matter now.

"Padme? Are you all right? Is Vader there?"

"Uh, no, not right now."

"Can you find him? We need to figure out a plan for going in there."

"Right, of course. I'll tell him right away," Padme said, feeling guilty for lying to her best friend. "He should be around, I think. I'll go look for him and let him know the situation."

"Good. Just... stay calm," Sabe urged her. "We will get Sola back, I promise, Padme."

"I know," Padme said quietly. She didn't know what else to say, but after a short, awkward pause, she added, "Thanks, Sabe. I don't know what I would've done without you."

"Well, it ain't over yet," Sabe sighed. "Once you tell Vader, though, call us back."

“Will do.” Padme swallowed an aching lump in her throat. “Sabe, love you.”

“Love you too. Talk to you soon. Sabe out.”

The com-call ended, and Padme sank onto her bed. She rubbed her forehead, shaking.

You’ve made it this far, Padme, she told herself. You can’t be afraid anymore. You’re not a little girl, and you’re certainly not helpless. Stop being so afraid! You know what to do.

She had to think. Fifth sector wasn’t too far from here. If she could just make it out of the castle, she could easily reach the lower levels. What she needed, though, was a disguise. Something that wouldn’t make her a target for thieves. She needed to blend in with the lower level crowds. If she only had a bounty hunter’s outfit, she’d be fine.

“Forgot to ask him last time,” she muttered wryly.

Vader paced through his castle furiously. He’d passed by Padme’s door at least four times, and he still had no idea what to do with her at this point. He knew she wouldn’t talk to him, now that she knew he’d deceived her. She probably wouldn’t even look at him. But the girl had no idea what he felt for her, how far he had fallen for her. He wasn’t even sure himself anymore. Everything seemed to be against his favor, so close, and yet, he was unable to touch.

Vader let out a furious yell and kicked at his chair. It crashed to the floor.

Why did she despise Starkiller so much? What had he done to her? Did the fool not understand what he was? Didn’t she know how many lives he had slaughtered mercilessly? How many cultures, civilizations he’d completely wiped out, either because they had simply been the wrong place at the wrong time, or because the Emperor had ordered it? The girl knew nothing. She knew *nothing*, he thought viciously.

Had she honestly thought that he would *rape* her? That he would sink that low?

He snorted. He was already a mass murderer, tortured people on a regular basis, and was the key instrument in bringing an entire government to its feet. Why not rape a nobody Senator? It wasn’t as if anyone would really care. She’d be forgotten in an instant. He could do it if he wanted. He could storm right into her room, take her, and no one would ever know.

But the thought of those brown eyes staring up at him with terror, with hatred, sent a gut-twisting agony to his chest and abdomen. She knew him too well, whether she realized it or not. He would never harm her. How could he? She, the one person in the entire galaxy to care about him... ever since...

He snarled and crushed a console with his mind.

She knew nothing. And yet... she knew *everything*.

He had to see her.

He practically flew out of his room, smashing his helmet onto his head. But when he came up to her door, to his astonishment, it opened as he approached. He knew immediately that

something was wrong. “Padme.” He stepped into her room, stopped instantly. Her room was empty. Her clothes were packed, some strewn on the floor. But she was not there.

He searched the room for her comlink, but it was missing as well. He knew in a heartbeat what she’d done.

“Padme!” He wheeled around and took off down the corridor. ‘*Padme!*’ As he turned a corner, he caught a glimpse of black cloth and a black boot disappear around the corner down the hall. “Padme, wait!” he ordered, hurrying after her. He heard the sound of her small feet dashing down the corridor, heard her breathing. But when he thought he’d caught up to her and turned the bend, she had disappeared.

“Padme!” Where the kriff had she gone? He weaved through several more smaller corridors, wondering at her game. She didn’t know this place as well as he. She didn’t know where the nearest exit was located. Not unless, of course...

Of course.

With a furious roar, he charged down the corridors and into the docking bay, searching for any sign of her. She knew where the docking bay was located since he’d given her free reign of the castle. And he had no doubt that she knew how to fly. He stormed through the bay, looking for any missing ships... but he saw nothing out of order. Where the kreth was she?

A legion of stormtroopers marched by him, out towards the nearest exit. Used to troopers in the castle, he ignored them and continued searching.

“PADME!” Vader roared, feeling a strange pang of longing lodge in his chest. Longing mixed with frustration, rage, and something he was no stranger to: sheer pain. But he hadn’t felt this kind of pain in a long, long time. He’d certainly never planned on feeling it this strongly before. But that pain was quickly overwhelmed by a rush of dark anger. How dare she leave him. How dare she refuse his protection, his hospitality... how *dare* she run away.

“Padme,” he intended to snarl. But it came out more as an agonized murmur more than anything else.

But he knew she was gone.

He didn’t see one of the stormtroopers glance back at him. However, after a quick pause, the trooper looked away and continued on with his legion.

Sabe rubbed the back of her neck and sighed. She’d never been one to idly sit by while events were in motion. But it’d been another hour, and she and Jix were still waiting for Vader to contact them.

“That’s it,” said Jix, rising to his feet with a grunt, “I’m calling him. This’s ridiculous, Red.”

“She’ll call,” Sabe said, although not convinced herself. What was taking Padme so long? Vader was supposed to be the one on top of these things. She knew him to be a man of action. It was more than a little odd that neither one of them had called her or Jix.

"I don't care," Jix said, irritated. "I'm still calling him. I'm not waiting around like this."

Sabe rose to her feet, intending to argue, to tell him wait a little longer, but then, the front door opened. Sabe turned to see the Dark Lord himself striding through. She'd never actually seen him in person, so as he stormed up to her, she froze, eyes widening. She hadn't realized how tall he was. To her astonishment, he came right up to her without one word. She stepped back instinctively.

"Where is she?" Vader snarled, taking hold of Sabe's arm.

Sabe refused to show her fear and glared up at him. "What are you talking about?" she snapped, tugging at her arm. "Kriffing sith hells, you're hurting me! Let me go or I'll kick your sorry metallic arse all the way back to your precious castle!"

Jix moved to intervene, a dark look on his face, but with a final yank, she pulled her arm away from his grip. However, Vader's hold slackened at the same time, so Sabe doubted it was her own strength that did the trick.

Vader stared down at her, breathing in that odd way of his. Did he have some kind of problem? Or was it just the workings of his suit? Whatever it was, it unnerved Sabe, but not enough to completely override her anger or sense of judgment. What she did notice about Vader, despite the fact that she couldn't see his face, was that he seemed not only angry and upset, but fearful.

It dawned on her suddenly: it was more than fear. It was *concern*. *Worry*. He was afraid *for Padme*. Darth Vader was actually anxious for another person's life. Sabe never thought she would see the day... And she most certainly never thought his concern would be generated for her best friend. Oh, how did Padme get herself tangled in situations like this? Couldn't she stop being... Padme for a minute and give her a break? Well, no, Sabe thought with a mental sigh. Padme was Padme, and that was what she loved about her.

And apparently, Sabe wasn't the only one who loved her friend.

Somehow, although it boggled Sabe's mind, Padme had managed to make the deadliest man in the universe fall in love with her.

Sabe's eyes narrowed. "What the kriff are you talking about, Vader?"

"Padme is gone," Vader boomed. "Tell me where she went!"

Sabe faltered. Oh, kriff... she hadn't... No, she couldn't have! "You mean she... she left?"

"Of course that's what I mean!" Vader growled, pacing the room furiously. "She must have told you where she was going."

"I... oh, no. Padme, you idiot!" Sabe put her head in her hands.

"We were contacted," said Jix, sounding truly pissed at his boss, 'by a man who has Padme's sister. He knew, somehow, that Sabe was a decoy, and that you had the real Padme Amidala in your castle.' He paused, let that sink in, before continuing, "He also said that he wanted her to meet him somewhere, alone. Padme wanted to be kept up with the details. I assumed she was telling you everything, so I didn't think I needed to report in."

"You thought incorrectly, as usual," Vader hissed darkly, rounding on him. "I should kill you for this failure."

"It's not his fault," broke in Sabe coldly. She folded her arms over her chest and glared up coolly at the dark lord. "It's yours. You were supposed to be with her."

"Your foolish young friend decided to risk her own life needlessly," Vader spat, his fingers clenching into deadly fists. "She managed to escape me before I could discover the end behind the means. It appears I have underestimated her bleeding heart and lack of self-concern."

"No," Sabe said softly. "You just can't understand why someone would sacrifice themselves for another person. It's called loving someone, Vader. Something you wouldn't understand."

"Silence," Vader hissed.

Sabe's chin tilted upward, and she fixed him with a sharp stare. "Or maybe," she continued quietly, "You *do*."

"*Silence!*" he ordered, taking a step towards her.

"After all, why do you care about what happens to Padme?" Sabe demanded. "Why keep her in your castle? Why have one of your most trusted men look after Padme's best friend? Why even care if she's killed or not? She's just some politician — and a brand new one at that! Why on earth would you even care if she lives or dies?"

"SILENCE!" Vader roared.

"You have feelings for her," Sabe said simply. "Strong feelings. You're human, just like me. Just like her. You care for her, deeply. And now it's ripping you apart that she's gone — left to do a noble thing: sacrificing herself for someone she loves. If you had the choice to take her place and die instead of her, you would do it, wouldn't you? You would die for her."

"Enough," the Sith rasped. "Enough."

"No. It's not enough. Because you're right. She *was* foolish to go meet her attacker alone — kriffing stupid and suicidal. I'm not anymore happy with her right now than you are, and I'm just as worried for her life as you."

Vader gazed at her, breathing more heavily than before. After a long, tense moment, he unclenched his fists and looked away. "I doubt that," he said in a low voice.

Sabe ignored the way Jix's mouth fell open and walked closer to him. She stared right up into his mask eyeholes.

"You love her, don't you."

Vader did not respond. Just looked at her, breathing. She felt Jix reach for her, seeming almost afraid that Vader would cut her down right there, but to all of their surprise, Vader finally said coldly, "The man who contacted you... Play back the recording."

Sabe blinked, stupefied by his evasion of the question and startled by the fact that she was still standing, still breathing, still *alive*, nodded once. "Right... right. Of course." She moved

up to the comlink-hub and played back the last message. That slithering voice sent shivers up her spine again. She felt as though it would wind up her body and entrap her in a tight lock that would refuse to release her. She breathed heavily when it was over.

But then, another voice caused her to freeze in complete fear. She'd never heard so much hatred, so much pure fury, so much darkness in one word.

"Xizor," Vader snarled.

Nearly twenty-three hundred hours. Nearly the time where Padme was supposed to meet the person who held her sister captive. She'd discarded the stormtrooper uniform soon after she'd slipped away from the legion, replacing it with a hot nightclub dress she bought at a level-two boutique and a hat with lace netting covering the upper half of her face. She'd gotten more than a few looks from the male passer-bys already, and as she entered the loud, dimly lit nightclub, nearly every male head turned to her. She scanned the crowd, saw no one out of the ordinary for a seedy place like this, and after a moment, went up to the bar.

She had no idea what this person would look like or how they would find her. Hopefully she'd be able to spot them coming in.

"Buy you a drink?" slurred a one-eyed, purple alien with fat lips.

Padme shook her head slightly. "No, thanks," she said distantly, her gaze sweeping the club.

"All right," the alien said, "then will you marry me?"

"No, thanks," Padme said.

"Drat," the alien grumbled before taking a large swig of his drink. He then glanced past Padme and leaned forward to the woman sitting on Padme's other side. "Buy you a drink?"

The woman, who wore a glittering blue, short dress, shook her head. "No, thanks," she said with a small toss of her luscious golden waves. 'Not interested.' She cast a quick glance to Padme, who was twisting around in her seat looking around at the nightclub. "He's not going to show, you know," she told the Senator in disguise.

Padme blinked, looked at the woman. "I'm sorry?"

"Your man," the blond woman said, giving her an apologetic smile. "The one you've been waiting for. If he's not waiting for you, he's stood you up. Sorry, honey, but that's the way it is. Men." She gave a light snort and shook her head, sipping a green drink.

Padme relaxed slightly. "I think he'll show... but it's a blind date," she added, 'so I don't know what he looks like.' When the woman raised a dubious eyebrow, she laughed, chagrined. The woman smiled along with her. "I know, pathetic, right?" Padme said, falsely cringing. "But... it was my sister's idea." She faltered at the thought of her older sister, her bossy, annoying older sister in the hands of a sadistic murderer. She swallowed and shrugged. "So... I felt I should come."

The woman nodded, a thoughtful look on her face. She glanced down at her drink and licked her lips. "How do you know it's a guy?" she asked suddenly.

Padme stared at her, then snickered. "Oh, Force, that would be something," she said, grinning. "But I'm pretty sure it's a guy."

"Mmm," said the blond woman. "You can never be too sure these days."

Padme hadn't even noticed the woman's hand had dropped to her lap. But before Padme could even comprehend what was happening, the blond woman stabbed a needle into Padme's leg and held it there for a split second. Padme gasped, jerked back, but the woman grabbed her arm and pulled the needle out slowly, letting it drop to the floor. Padme's vision started to swim.

"You..." Padme stammered in horror. "You're the... the one who..." Her eyelids fluttered, and she swayed in her seat. But before she toppled forward, the woman grabbed her other arm and hoisted Padme's arm over her shoulders.

"Too much to drink," she heard the blond woman say in a false sweet voice to the bartender. "I should get her home." Her unnaturally strong hands gripped Padme's arms tightly.

Then, everything went black.

TBC...

So yeah, a lot happened in this chapter. I've had several people asking me for longer chapters, but I hate cramming so much into one chapter, even if it is longer. For me, at least, I like things a little more spaced out. But that's just me. I'm trying to keep the chapters four thousand words plus, no shorter.

If you haven't figured out who the blond woman is, you'll know by next chapter. For all those who know who it is, you get... um... well... a mention at the beginning of the next chapter! Wow, that's lame. Eesh. :p

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

18. Dark Ends

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thanks so much, guys! :)

Note: So happy you liked the Jix/Sabe interaction. But this chapter is really more focusing on our main couple. :) And I just watched *Beauty and the Beast* (Disney, of course) last night because it was my favorite movie of all time as a kid, so that inspired me to update. That movie really is timeless.

OK, get ready for a really long chapter. :) To those who wanted longer chapters, this is for you.

OTHER NOTE: Congrats to everyone who knew who the blond woman was. I promised I'd mention you — and, I've decided to virtually “hand out” Jix and Vader plushies to those who want them. :D SO! Here are the people who guessed correctly: **sexystarwarlover**, **ibelieveintruelove**, **Renaly**, **Undeniably Me**, **Jedi Master Misty Sman-Esay**, **phantom-jedi1**, **anakinpadmekenobi**, and **Padawan Mom**, who I have to give a huge thanks to because she's the absolute best. :)

WARNING: This chapter is pretty intense in some parts, intended for more mature readers. It's definitely not an “M” rating, for sure, but just to warn you, it's not a light and fluffy chapter.

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Eighteen: Dark Ends

The first thing that Padme thought when she woke up was “Wow. That was a really, really, really stupid idea to go alone.”

It had been an impetuous decision that she was already regretting, a decision fueled by lack of planning, anger, and most importantly, fear. Fear of her sister's and Sola's life... but more importantly, fear of Vader. Or Starkiller. Whoever he was. She couldn't trust him anymore, even though he had proven he would not rape her... at least then.

Well, she'd wanted to get out. And she'd certainly done that. She knew she should've been more careful when in the bar. That lady had been waiting for her, and like a fool, she'd fallen into the trap perfectly.

You've done it this time, Padme, she thought, But now that you've gotten yourself in, you've gotta get yourself out. No time for pity parties.

First things first: find out her captor's identity and her whereabouts. She was lying on her back on something incredibly soft and cushy — a lightweight feather-bed. She slowly sat up and looked around, startled by her surroundings. She'd never seen anywhere so utterly luxurious or palatial in her life. Compared to her sparse, dark room in Vader's castle, this was complete heaven. The bedroom was enormous, but open, light, and warm, almost like a tropical getaway. She half expected to see wildlife emerging from the small pond that sat near the wall and was fed by a lightly falling waterfall streaming almost magically out of the wall. Unlike Vader's preference for dark colors, the fabrics were exotic pale greens, corals, golds, and crimsons, embroidered with gold and silver threading. Was it... it looked like actual *gold* threading.

Her circular, massive feather-bed, decorated with plump pillows and the softest linens, was overshadowed by a thin, see-through canopy. Padme pulled the light fabric aside and edged her way off the bed. Glancing down suddenly, she realized that she was *not* in the same clothes as when she had been knocked out. Instead of her short black dress, she wore a long, form-fitting silk nightgown, or dress, colored a burnt golden.

All right... this was more than a little creepy.

Running a hand through her hair, she started for the door. However, it slid open as she neared, and a shadow appeared in the doorway, causing her to halt and take an instinctive step back. The person stepped into the room, and the light revealed his features. He was as tall as Vader, a deep sage green, and wore the finest clothing she'd ever seen. Elegant robes, pristine handmade leather boots. He was bald except for a black ponytail pulled high at the back of his head. His features were sharp, reptilian, and his eyes glittered.

Padme had seen him before. And she could honestly say she'd wished to never see him again. Didn't look as though her wish had come true.

"Prince Xizor!" she breathed, astonished. "You... *you're* the one behind all of this?"

"Guilty as charged, I'm afraid," he said, flashing her a grin. Instead of feeling attracted to him, she felt sick. 'You shouldn't be that surprised, my dear.' He glided around near her and took a seat on the sofa, leaning back, looking completely relaxed: the exact opposite of Padme's emotions. "After all, you could clearly see I desired you when we first met."

Padme gave him an incredulous look. "We met one time. *One time*, and you feel the need to attack me, kidnap my sister and threaten her life, and then kidnap me?" She shook her head. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"Oh, come now," he purred, his eyes gleaming. "You honestly didn't think I would let a woman escape me so easily. Especially a woman such as yourself," he added, his gaze raking over her form.

"I'm flattered," she retorted sarcastically. 'It's not every day a guy goes to these lengths. You know,' she added, "Where I come from, if a guy likes a girl, he usually *asks her out*. He does not *threaten her sister and kidnap her*."

He seemed amused. "You are a feisty one, aren't you? Excellent." He rose to his feet, towering over her. "I look forward to our future meetings. This will prove to be interesting. I always prefer a challenge." When he smiled, his teeth gleamed white. He gave her a nod and left the room.

Once he was gone, Padme shook her head and covered her face with her hands. "Idiot, idiot, idiot." Now she was wishing she'd stayed with Vader. He might have lied to her, but at least he wasn't this creepy. However, as soon as that thought entered her mind, she quickly berated herself. She didn't know if she would be anymore safe with Vader than with Xizor, at this point. Starkiller was wild, dangerous, and unpredictable. His intensity and sheer power left her feeling small and helpless against him, even if she put on a brave face. But he had no idea how much he terrified her.

Vader, on the other hand...

She never thought she'd say this, but she was safe with Vader. Vader was tall, dark, and ominous, but he was predictable. His voice was harsher and more booming, but it didn't carry that malicious undertone as Starkiller's had. Vader had never disturbed her or frightened her as much as Starkiller. With Vader, she felt at peace... loved. Her heart ached at the thought of losing him, of never seeing him again. But he and Starkiller were one in the same. They were both cold-blooded killers. Starkiller had just been the one to remind her of that.

But no matter how she tried, she could not get him out of her head.

"So, what's the plan?" Jix asked, folding his brawny arms over his chest.

"I kill Xizor and recover Padme," said Vader coldly.

"Yes, well, we know that," Sabe said with a roll of her eyes, causing Jix to shoot her another incredulous look, as if to say 'Did you just roll your eyes at kriffing Darth Vader?' 'But,' she continued, "I mean an actual plan. You can't just barge into Xizor's palace and slice his head off with your lightsaber, pick up Padme, and just walk out of there. This is Prince Xizor we're talking about. If I'm correct, he's second to no one other than the Emperor and you."

"I am well aware of that," Vader said, glaring down at her. "And believe me, I have been in Xizor's palace before. I know where the weak spots are in his security system. And if there were no weak spots, that would not be a problem for me."

"Well, ain't you just darn perfect," Sabe drawled, giving him a dry look. "So you're just going to waltz in there and kill him, is that it?"

"Of course not," snapped Vader. "I am not a fool."

"Never said you were. But even you can't know every single exit in the palace," Sabe said. "And even you can't do it all by yourself. You're not blasterproof. I think." She eyed his armor carefully, wondering if he indeed was blasterproof. She honestly didn't even know if the man was human. But he truly seemed to care about her friend, and that was all that mattered at this point.

"You are correct," Vader said, surprising her.

"She is?" Jix said, dubious.

"Indeed. This is not a one-man job."

"All right," said Jix, "So what do you want me to do?"

"Not you," replied Vader, glancing down at Sabe. "Her."

Sabe raised an eyebrow, ignoring Jix's exclamation of "What?" This was getting more interesting by the second. "What can I do?" she asked.

"You will provide a distraction," he answered. 'As a woman, you will be less likely to be suspected, but only slightly. I assume you know how to defend yourself.' When she nodded, he continued, "Good. You will need it. Now listen carefully. There are a series of underground passageways that link my castle with Xizor's and the Emperor's. Your job is to get into the passage leading to Xizor's palace. You will distract the guards and take them out. However, the hall is lined with security cameras, so you must take the ones near the entrance out as well. They will be located on either side of the entrance."

"You're letting her do this all alone?" Jix demanded angrily. "No way!"

"Be quiet and let me finish, Jixton," snapped Vader. "You come in next. You will don a guard's uniform, pretend to show up as backup, and pretend to take her back. But the camera feed will be out by then, so you will simply call it in that you have the prisoner and instead enter Xizor's palace."

"What's all this for?" Sabe questioned. "Once we get inside, we're not going to be able to get rid of every single guard."

"You are merely a distraction," Vader said. "And you will also rescue the Senator's sister, who will undoubtedly be in a detention cell on the third level. I will complete the rest."

Sabe wondered how he would manage to sneak into the palace looking like he did. And honestly, his breathing could be heard from several yards away. There would be no way he would pull off the element of surprise. But if he thought he could do it, she would not be the one to argue with him. She'd be safe with Jix, and she'd handled much more dangerous missions than this one. As long as Vader did his part, she could do hers. Looking up at the dark lord, she nodded firmly. "All right," she said, "Let's do it."

Padme paced the room restlessly, her arms folded over her chest. It had been hours, and she'd seen no one. She almost wanted Xizor to come in, just to end this horrible waiting period. The tension about what she knew Xizor would try to do to her nearly ripped her nerves apart. But she had to stay strong. She'd been in the same castle as Darth Vader. She could handle this. But Xizor, she knew, was more evil than Vader would be to her.

Padme sank down on the bed, remembering the look on Vader's face when she'd told him to take her. She couldn't discern whether it had been fury, doubt, or horror on his face. Even without his mask, he proved difficult to read.

Her musing ended when the door slid open. She stiffened, bolted off the bed, ready to shoot some nasty words at Xizor. But it was not Xizor, it was his assistant — the woman who

had captured her at the bar. The woman's eyes were strangely distant and cold, and her flawless porcelain face a blank mask. Dressed in deep blue and yellow, the woman strode up to Padme.

"Get dressed," she ordered brusquely. "The Prince is waiting."

"He can wait forever as far as I'm concerned," Padme retorted.

The woman's eyes hardened. "Get dressed, or I will dress you."

"Forget it."

The woman grabbed Padme's arm, nearly wrenching it out of its socket, and yanked her towards the closet. Padme let out a hiss of pain, and without another thought, swiped her elbow across the woman's face. The woman barely flinched and continued pulling her. Padme's arm burned — it had been like hitting a wall of steel! This woman, she realized with growing dread, was not human.

"Save your pathetic attempts to injure me," the woman said tonelessly. "You will not succeed."

"We'll see," Padme muttered. She tried to pull her arm away, realizing she wouldn't be able to overpower the woman, at least yet. She needed a better plan. 'All right, you can let go,' she said, sounding defeated. "I'll get dressed myself."

The woman shoved her towards the closet. "Hurry up."

Padme shot her a dark look and suddenly wondered if she could find an EMP somewhere. But first, she needed to get changed. Dresses first, escape plans later. She looked through the massive selection of dresses and robes. They were finer and more extravagant than she had ever seen before, made of the rarest and probably most expensive fabrics known to man. She couldn't help but give a low whistle when she found a dress by a designer that cost more credits than she made in three years. But Xizor could afford it. She'd heard that he had so many credits, if someone tried to dig their way through the pile of credits, they would not even reach the bottom in several years. And if the rumors were true, Vader was even more wealthy — the Emperor being the only one with more money.

Padme distantly wondered, before she could stop herself, if Vader would ever spend that much money on her. The dresses that he'd bought her were nice, but nowhere near as luxurious as this. Oh, kriff it, why was she still thinking about him? Her heart aching, she sighed shortly and pulled out the most modest dress she could find and slammed the 'fresher door shut on the woman's face.

Stop thinking about him. He lied to you. He hurt you. He's dangerous.

Much to her horror, she felt tears welling up in her eyes. She angrily blinked them back and swallowed, but her chest would not stop hurting. She knew with a heavy heart that despite his betrayal, despite the fact that he was probably the deadliest man in the universe... she had not stopped feeling something for him. But how could she ever trust him again?

Well, she probably wouldn't ever see him again, she thought grimly as she pulled her hair back into a loose bun and splashed water on her face. Xizor had her, and she doubted he would ever let her go — alive, that was.

On the other hand, she'd gotten out of Vader's fortress. She might just be able to escape this castle, as well.

Padme, honey, now's the time for one of your wishes of fire to come true. You will make it come true.

Taking in a deep breath, she stepped out of the fresher.

The plan, Vader had to admit, would not have been possible without the assistance of Sabe and Jix. Connected through earcom, he was able to hear her distract the guards, then take them out with flawless precision. Despite her irritating knack for speaking to him like he was any other man, Vader knew a shrewd woman when he met one. At this point, he only respected the two women that had recently entered his acquaintance. The other woman he had used to respected... was no longer among the living.

One of the woman that was currently among the living was not too far away. People were so easy to manipulate, he thought with a derisive snort. A simple push of the mind, and they were not a problem. All too easy to slip into Xizor's famously protected palace. But that lizard had never thought that Vader would dare to enter his palace. He thought he was impenetrable in his cushy quarters. Oh, how wrong he was, Vader thought, smiling wickedly. He would enjoy removing Xizor's head from his long neck and watching his body collapse to the floor.

The cameras would have been a problem if he looked suspicious. But as Xizor's top security officers wore cloaks similar to those of the Emperor's Red Guard, he simply removed one from one of Xizor's guards and pulled the hood low over his head. He had his helmet merely as a precaution: if, by a narrow, narrow chance that something happened, he did not want to be caught without his helmet. So far, the only people who knew of his true face were Padme and the Emperor — and even so, he hadn't gone before the Emperor without his mask ever since the accident.

He followed the dark twinge of emotions that had led him here and crept through the hallways. Xizor's suite had to be close.

Then, all of a sudden, he felt a wave of panic hit him full on — a panic that was not his — and, gripping his lightsaber tightly, he jammed his helmet onto his head and took off down the corridor, his mind intent on only one thing: *Padme*. She was in trouble, and if he didn't save her in time, she would never be the same woman again.

Oh, Xizor's death would be slow and sweet.

Whoa!

The moment Padme entered Xizor's private chambers, something hit her senses as if someone had knocked her over the head. Instantly she felt intensely hot, restless, and almost as if she had been drugged by something amazingly sweet... and incredibly potent. She blinked rapidly, nearly stumbled, but Xizor's servant caught her in a tight grip and pushed her forward.

“Now, now, Guri, be gentle,” said Xizor.

Padme stared at him. He looked as though he were... glowing. His skin, formerly a cool green color, was a warm golden hue and made her dizzy just to look at him. His chest was practically bare except for a button-less robe open at the chest that flowed down to the floor. He wore dark silk pants and fine slippers. It seemed as though he were ready for... well, Padme would have said sleeping, but she doubted that sleeping would be on his mind right now.

It certainly was not on her mind...

Wait just a kriffing moment! She snapped herself out of her stupor. *What are you thinking, Padme? This man has kidnapped you and your sister, and you're thinking of... sleeping with him? Are you out of your mind?*

Xizor drew closer, his eyes raking over her form. Without looking at Guri, he ordered, “Leave us.”

“I was going, anyway,” Padme said, and turned to leave the room to escape the unbearable heat. But Xizor strode forward and grasped her arm tightly. She closed her eyes, feeling that strange, delicious delirium rise up in her once more. But it didn’t feel right... It felt off.

“Oh, no, not you,” Xizor purred, drawing near her. His breath was cool on her neck. “We’ve barely had a chance to get to know one another. And I look forward to knowing you very, very well. All of you.” She felt his eyes all over her body.

Guri left the room without a word, and the door shut behind her.

“Now,” continued Xizor, drawing Padme up against his tall body, “Where were we?”

“Nowhere,” she breathed, feeling faint and overwhelmed by his closeness. Almost... too overwhelmed. His strong arms came around her waist, his hands massaging her sides, and she had to bite back a gasp when his lips lowered to her neck. This was too much... But yet, she didn’t want him to stop. Against her will, her hands clutched the sleeves of his robe, and she pressed herself closer to him. He let out a purr of pleasure and drew her back further into the room.

It wasn’t until she felt him lower her onto the bed did she feel that something was horribly wrong. Like a flash of lightning, she felt a white-hot fury and saw a familiar face, his eyes full of flame. She gasped, jerked away from Xizor, feeling strangely cold. Xizor pulled away from her, frowned.

“What is it?”

“I... I don’t... Wait.” She gripped his shoulder, tried to push him away. “I don’t want this. I can’t be doing this.” She tried to get up, but he pushed back onto the bed with more force and hovered over her.

“Yes, of course you do,” he said, and she felt that strange heat wash over her again. But when he leaned down to kiss her, Padme saw *him* again, his lips parted in a snarl, his darkly clothed body seething with passionate heat. She gasped again, shoved Xizor away, and rolled over to the other side of the bed. All heat had gone, and she was left with an iciness running down her spine.

She realized now that whatever attraction she felt towards Xizor was not of her doing. He was using some kind of control over her... some scent, maybe pheromones to bring her under his spell. That was what he'd wanted all along, and she felt sick for wanting it, even if it hadn't been her fault that she'd wanted it. "What the kriff are you doing me?" she hissed, the anger overtaking Xizor's passion. "You sick Sithspawn!"

Xizor's skin turned slightly more green, and he rose to his feet, his face a mask of coolness. "You resist me."

"Kriffing Sith hells, yes!" She couldn't remember being more furious in her life, not even with Vader. She knew she was playing with fire doing this, that things might end up worse for her than if she did not resist him... But frankly, she didn't give a kriffing stang one way or the other.

"Unwise," he said, starting for her. "But perhaps all the more interesting." He grinned darkly, revealing a set of sharp teeth, and lunged for her. She tried to skirt back to the other side of the bed as he came around behind her, but Xizor was too quick. He grabbed her waist, flipped her on her back, and trapped her to the bed with his own body.

"You're pathetic," she spat in his face. "You can't even get a woman without either using mind control or forcing her!"

"I take what I please," he growled. "And you *will* obey me."

"Like *hell* I will!" She jammed her knee up into his groin. He groaned, doubling over, and she punched him across the face. As he flew back, she scrambled off the bed and bolted for the door. Locked, of course. She slammed her hand on the keypad, feeling panic take her senses, and then turned, seeking another exit. If she could just find a window—

But Xizor had recovered, and he started for her, now a cold sage color. "You will not escape me, Padme," he told her triumphantly. "I will not be denied my prey." And as she tried to run, he dove for her and threw her on the floor. She let out a whimper and struggled to get to her feet, but he grabbed the back of her head and crouched over her, an evil grin spread across his face.

"I will enjoy this," he said, leering down at her. "You might as well, too."

"Go to Hoth, you son of a Sith," she spat, feeling blood tinge her mouth.

He raised his hand to slap her, but she didn't recoil—

But a furious roar rocked the entire room. Xizor whirled around, startled, and Padme looked at the figure storming into the room.

She never thought she would be so glad to see Darth Vader in her life.

Darth Vader could hardly see anything for the rage flaming his vision. As he burst into the room, the first thing and the only thing he saw was Xizor leaning over Padme, his fingers locked in her hair, a vicious sneer on his face. It only took that one second for Vader to let out an enraged roar — one that didn't sound human at all — and ignite his lightsaber. Xizor leapt to his feet, fear in his eyes. Vader drank in his fear, charged at Xizor, and swung his saber,

slicing Xizor across his bare chest. Xizor let out a howl and recoiled; but Vader merely enjoyed the noise of pain from his enemy. He chopped off Xizor's right arm, then stabbed him through the chest. Finally, he sliced off the Falleen prince's head and kicked the lifeless body to the floor.

After a moment, he turned to see Padme getting to her feet. She looked shaken, her dress crumpled and hair askew, and he saw blood on her lips, only infuriating him further. But he was more astonished than anything to see a dark anger in her eyes. She glared at him, then at Xizor's body and spat blood on the ground. She swiped at her bloody mouth and licked her lips.

"Did he hurt you?" Vader demanded, striding up to her.

"No, I'm fine." She ran a hand through her curls. "I just want to get out of here."

"Come, then." He took her arm, but she pulled back. With a frustrated sigh, he hurried out of Xizor's chambers, Padme rushing along with him. He glanced at her periodically, but she was stonily silent. He just couldn't figure out why. Part of him had expected her to rush into his arms, sobbing with relief. But apparently, she was stronger than he gave her credit for.

"You *could* say thank you," he snapped, irritated at her stubborn behavior.

"I could," she retorted, "but I won't."

He rounded on her, but she didn't recoil. For some reason, he was glad of that. "What is wrong with you?" he demanded furiously. "I went through all of this to rescue you, and you shove it in my face. Don't you realize your situation was extremely precarious, you ungrateful woman?"

"I'm not ungrateful," she returned touchily.

"Good," he snarled.

"I'm pissed off."

"Join the club."

"I would, but I figured *you* started it, so I think I'll pass."

He shook his head and threw his hands up in the air. "Unbelievable. Why did I even bother doing this in the first place?"

"You tell me. I didn't ask for your help!"

"No," he said, shooting her a glare. "But you needed it. Face it, Smuggler, you wouldn't have gotten out of there. Ever. Xizor might have tired of you... eventually. But you're the only woman able to resist his advances. That's bound to make him unhappy and excited at the same time. He would not cease trying to break your spirit, Padme."

"I wouldn't let him," she said forcefully.

He didn't look at her. "I know." Oh, did he know. She'd been spending time with him, and her spirit hadn't broken yet. It would take much more to hurt her. But he had a sick feeling he already had. Well, at least she was still talking to him and hadn't bolted the moment he freed her from her room. That was a good sign.

They passed a locked glass door full of ammunition and weapons, and Padme paused. "I want a gun."

"What for?" he demanded.

"Protection." She stepped back and looked ready to smash the glass open with her foot, but he stepped in front of her.

"That's why I'm here," he growled.

"I don't care. I want my own weapon. I'm sick and tired of people doing everything for me. I'm done. Now, stand back so I can smash the glass."

Vader stared at her, snapped, "Oh, for Force's sake," and flicked on his saber. He cut a hole in the glass and took out a large blaster and a pack of ammunition, handing them to her. She snapped the ammunition into the gun and held it, looking pleased. "Satisfied, then?" he demanded.

She gave him a terse nod and marched on down the corridor. However, when they passed through a set of doors at the end, they came face to face with none other than the infamous Boba Fett, who had his weapon trained on them. Padme halted, stepped back, but Vader just stopped and moved slightly in front of her.

"I have a couple of wealthy clients that want you dead, Vader," Fett snarled. "I aim to please."

"Aren't you thoughtful?" Padme put in acidly.

"Stay outta this, woman. It doesn't concern you. Or maybe it does," Fett added with a low, hoarse laugh.

Vader quickly felt the rage building in him; and so far, that had been the only reason Fett had been allowed to talk for this long. Vader needed to be as one with the Dark Side as possible when he finally sliced a hole through the hunter's chest. But oddly enough, the anger wasn't exactly the dark anger that he usually felt. More of a righteous anger, an avenging, not vengeful anger. He glanced at Padme, thought only of protecting her, keeping her from harm. And if something did happen to her... someone would pay.

The darkness whirled up inside him like a red hot firestorm. The lights flickered in response, and Padme shivered, glancing at him suddenly. Fett also seemed to notice the change in Vader's stance and instinctively backed away a step, keeping his gun trained on Vader.

"You fool," Vader snarled, starting for him. "Do you honestly believe you will be able to stop a Sith Lord?"

"I've dealt with you before," Fett retorted.

"A minor miscalculation," Vader hissed darkly. "It will not happen again, I assure you. You, however, will not be so fortunate, bounty hunter." He tightened his grip on his saber, waited for Fett to make the first defensive move.

Fett took another step back, seeming to shrink before the power of the Dark Lord. "Maybe you should ask your girlfriend what I'm doing here," he said as a last ditch effort. "After all,

she's the reason I'm here."

Vader halted, and, after a moment, glanced at Padme, whose face was white.

"That's a lie," Padme said, her brown eyes glittering with a myriad of troubling emotions. "I'm not the one who ordered the hit on him."

The hit on him? What was she talking about? Now more irritated than ever, Vader demanded, "What is this about, Senator?" He couldn't let Fett distract him, but on the other hand, if Padme hadn't been telling him something... He obviously needed to know before they went any further.

Padme licked her lips, her eyes flickering from Vader to Fett then back. "Fett has been hired to kill you."

Not a surprise there, but what did that have to do with her? Not unless she... No. She couldn't.

"By you?" Vader questioned in a low, icy voice.

Padme's eyes widened, horrified. "What? Of *course not*! How could you even *think* that?" An odd twinge hit his chest when he saw her brown eyes suddenly glittering with traces of tears. "Not by me, by a few of my colleagues, but I — look out!" she yelled as Fett used this distraction to flick on his flamethrower and blast a wave of fire at Vader.

Slightly caught off guard, Vader took a step back and held up his hand to shield himself and Padme against the flames. He knew now he and Padme would have to finish this conversation after they had made it out of Xizor's palace completely, after he had finished Fett off. As he halted the flow of the flames, Padme fired her weapon at Fett, moving closer to Vader. Fett fired back at her with his free hand, and as Vader blocked the shots, he unleashed a wave of his own fury and sent the fire blazing back into Fett. The hunter let out a yell of surprise and pain as the flames hit him and sent him crashing into the back wall. Vader lunged forward, saber flashing, and swiped down at the hunter, who rolled out of the way and fired on him again. Vader easily blocked the bolts and sliced the nozzle off Fett's blaster.

Enraged, Vader then held out his hand, drew on the dark side to lift Fett up against the wall. The hunter clawed at his throat, choked and gasped for air, then tried to swing at Vader. Vader's fist squeezed harder, and Fett drew in a sharp, wheezy breath, kicking uselessly.

"No," Vader heard Padme gasp, "No, no..." He ignored her. The dark side was running hot through his veins, and red overcast his vision. He could hardly think now, only feel the fury, the pent-up rage...

"STOP IT!" Padme screamed. "ANAKIN, *STOP!*"

ANAKIN. ANAKIN. ANAKIN!

Vader heard her voice ringing in his ears. He blinked several times, stared at the dying bounty hunter, and, with slight hesitation, released his invisible grip and watched as the hunter collapsed to the floor. He glared down at the man for a moment before whirling around to face Padme, irritated at her deluded conscience and the fact that he did not want to see that horrified look on her face.

However, the Force suddenly screamed a warning, and he turned sharply around to see that Fett had taken out a hidden pistol and was pointing it not at him — but at Padme. Fury took him; and before Padme could get another word out, he let the dark side overwhelm his senses, and he kicked the gun out of Fett's hands, and drove a hole through his chest with his lightsaber. Padme let out a gasp, and Fett sank to the floor again. Vader, breathing heavily from the influence of the dark side, stormed up to a stunned Padme, took her arm, and yanked her along with him down the corridor.

They didn't speak for a full five minutes until Padme stammered, "My-my sister — she's still here—"

"Jixton and your friend are taking care of that," Vader said shortly. "You need to be someplace where you can recover."

"Recover... I..."

"Padme, breathe!" he ordered, halting suddenly and taking her arms. 'You need to breathe.' When her breath started coming out in short rasps, he sighed in irritation. "Padme, he was going to kill you. Don't feel sorry for him."

"I don't," she blurted out. To his relief, color flooded back into her cheeks. "I mean, I know he what he was. I saw him going for the gun. But you... you just..."

"Killed him? Like I killed Xizor?"

"Well, I..." She didn't look like she could find anything coherent to say, probably because she knew he was right. It was a kill or be killed world, and especially so in this palace.

"Come, we must leave." Vader urged her on, and she stumbled but ran along with his quick stride. "My vehicle is waiting outside."

They didn't speak again until they had entered his speeder and were away. Vader's comlink beeped, and he answered it.

"Jix here," said Jix. "We got the sister. We're on our way out."

"Good. Take the sister back to the Senator's apartment," replied Vader.

"How is she?" Padme asked frantically. "Is she hurt? And how are you and Sabe?"

"We're all fine, everything's fine here," Jix replied, sounding amused. "How are you?"

"I'm... I've been better," Padme admitted. "I'm just glad you're all right, though. Tell Sola I'll see her as soon as possible."

"Will do. Jix out."

Once the link had ended, Padme glanced at Vader. "Will you take me to my apartment now?"

"No. I want you to get your bearings first. Your sister can wait."

"But—"

"Considering your sister's behavior in the past," interrupted Vader, "She will only be concerned with her own well-being. I want to make sure you are well before you look after

others. You don't take care of yourself, Padme. You're far too selfless."

"At least I *care* about other people," she snapped.

Vader's lips pressed firmly together, but he didn't respond to her challenge. Instead, he said, "You will stay at my castle for the next hour or so. You need sleep and nourishment. Once you feel better, I'll take you back to your apartment."

"Fine."

Vader didn't like how this was turning out. But what had he expected, really? He remembered his snide words before she had left, that he was not a knight in shining armor. And yet, some small part of him wished he could be... for her. This coldness, this awkwardness between them did not suit him. Why wasn't she thanking him, the ungrateful girl? He had just risked everything to save her life, including risking the Emperor's displeasure. He had a bad feeling that the Emperor would be greatly displeased, considering how the old man enjoyed seeing him and Xizor pitted against each other, vying for his attentions. Sidious made him both infuriated and ill at once. He couldn't wait until he regained his full strength, the full use of his lungs, before he cut off Palpatine's head.

But, it seemed, that someone else had been trying to kill him first. That brought him back to the conversation he'd had with Fett and Padme, just before he'd killed Fett. Annoyed with the lack of movement his helmet provided, he pulled it off and tossed it onto the backseat.

"Why didn't you tell me your friends had a price on my head?" Vader asked tightly, his fingers gripping the controls with iron fingers. He wouldn't look at her.

"I was going to," she returned, a bitter note to her voice. "The night that you came back, when we..." She trailed off and looked out at her window.

Vader felt his gut clench and a warm, delicious heat rise through his core. Oh, he remembered that night. The way her hair fell around her flawless face. The way her body trembled at his touch. The way her lips quivered just before he took them with his own. The way her small, delicate hands ran through his hair, down his chest, and palmed over his heart. The way her soft body felt against his. The way her brown eyes were shining like they never had before.

"I didn't get the chance," she finished after a long pause, ignorant of his internal musings. "And then..." She sucked in a breath, looked down at her lavish gown, now singed by Fett's flamethrower. She fingered the burnt material restlessly. "When I found out who you were... I forgot to tell you."

"Accidentally forgot, or purposefully?" he asked with an edge to his voice.

"Accidentally," she said forcefully, shooting him an angry glare. 'But it doesn't matter.' There came that bitter tone again. "You didn't need me to warn you. You took care of that bounty hunter just fine without me telling you anything."

"Would you rather have him kill me?" he snarled, flexing his fingers. He could feel the dark side again, remembering the way Fett's neck closed in his grip. A sense of deep satisfaction rolled over him at the thought of Fett's death. It had been too painless and quick a death for the hunter, especially considering how Fett came after and nearly killed Padme. He should have wounded him further, but Padme had not been pleased with the strangulation.

The dragon in him roared once again, and he had to squash it down before Padme noticed several of the objects in the speeder shaking.

“No,” she said instantly.

“Then would you rather I had released him to kill more people?” he challenged.

“No,” she repeated, sounding frustrated. “I know he’s bad, I just... I didn’t want to see you kill him like that. It was a cruel way to kill him. Just because he’s done bad things doesn’t mean you have to strangle him to death. I don’t think he was as bad as Xizor.”

“Ah, so a quick, easy killing is what you would prefer.” It hadn’t been nearly quick enough, but ultimately very easy. Killing always had been easy for him. He hadn’t met a real challenge since the days of the Jedi... but those days were long over, thanks to him and his master. He doubted very much if any were still alive.

“No! I just... I don’t know!” she snapped, her small fists clenching. “You’re so cruel sometimes!”

“Only sometimes?” he said with a grim smile.

If looks could kill, he was certain he would be dead in one split second. He was actually surprised she hadn’t tried to slap him already.

“Sometimes,” she repeated firmly.

“I must be losing my touch.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure the Emperor can make up for you,” she replied, smiling bitterly.

“Then he really does have everything,” Vader said with a sigh. “There go my plans for galactic domination. Now what will I do with my life?”

“You could take up gardening,” she said, sounding surprised by his levity, considering the situation.

“I’d be too tempted to hit people with shovels.”

“I hear there’s an opening for loggers on Endor.”

“That might work; I could use my lightsaber to cut the trees down.”

“That’s if the Ewoks don’t eat you first.”

“I’m sure I could take a few furry midgets.”

“You really are the least diplomatic person I know.”

“That must be the worst insult you could give to a person, I’m sure,” he said dryly. “I prefer to use aggressive negotiations.”

“What’s that, where you hack everyone down with your lightsaber?”

“Of course not. I’d tell everyone to get the kriff out of my way, give them a chance to run, and then I’d hack them down with my lighstabber.”

She pressed her lips together in a thin line. “If you’re trying to be humorous, it’s not working.”

“Would you rather me discuss something else?” He glanced at her dress, then to her eyes. “I’m a Sith Lord, Padme. I kill people. If you can’t take that—”

“It’s not that, it’s just... you’re so... blase about it!” she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in defeat. “You’re taking peoples’ lives! Doesn’t that *bother* you?”

He paused, wondering how he could put this so she wouldn’t kick him out of the vehicle. “So you would prefer I allowed Xizor to live, then.”

Padme paled; and he realized that he had said the wrong thing. However, it was too late to take it back now.

“Xizor’s a monster,” she murmured, looking away again. She had gone very pale, and her eyes had dulled. ‘He almost raped me.’ She didn’t see how his lips parted in a silent snarl, or how he nearly cracked the controls with his prosthetic hand replacement. “He... I didn’t care if you killed him. I still don’t. But still... I don’t want anyone to die.”

He snorted, shook his head. “You’re not going to last very long in this universe, then.”

Now, she looked furious. Twisting to face him, her eyes darkened, and she hissed in a voice he’d never heard from her before, “Don’t you *dare* insult me like that. Of course I know people kill each other. Of course I know how the universe works. It’s one corrupt man after another, one person always trying to beat down another just to get ahead. The entire universe is run by men who will do anything to have power. That’s how it’s always been.”

He let his eyes sweep over her form and her face. She didn’t look good, he mused. She looked tired, weary. Broken. It was not how he wanted to see her.

He wanted his starry-eyed Smuggler back. But after all she’d been through over the past several months, he didn’t know if he would ever see that woman again. Part of him was glad: she was finally growing up, losing her bleeding heart naivete. She’d be smarter, more cynical, which was what a Senator and a woman needed to be in a cutthroat galaxy such as this. She’d be bolder, too — but she always had been. However, another part of him was aching for her. She was the one sun in his constant darkness, the crystal light in his starless sky.

She was his wish of fire.

TBC...

We get a little more insight into Vader’s head, and although you may love him, you clearly see he’s not the nicest guy. But then again, Xizor’s easy to hate, so I honestly didn’t mind him dying either. :p But that’s one of the differences in this story than from the others I’ve written. I know I’ve written Vader way too nice in the past, when he’s not — he’s a trained killer. While he may be falling for Padme, that doesn’t change his underlying behavior. Just to warn

you, he's STILL not going to be a sweetheart by the end of this fic. Which, by the way, will be a few chapters longer than I had anticipated. Hope you don't mind.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

19. Even You

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thanks so much, guys! :)

***Note:** Wow, I got most people thinking Xizor got off too quick. :) I considered not killing him, but I think he needed to die. However, more of you were sad that I killed off Boba. Have you people no faith in our beloved bounty hunter? ;)*

As for Jix and Sabe... I was pleasantly surprised that people want more of them in the chapters, although I'm glad you liked the Padme/Vader interaction. It's so weird writing a dark Vader and Padme together. This is really new to me. I'm not used to such an evil Vader... but I think it's more in character, and I like writing him that way.

A little more fluff towards the beginning. :) Just because you suffered through that last dark chapter.

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Nineteen: Even You

When he'd first met her, Jix honestly didn't know whether to kiss or kill Sabe Verina. The woman had driven him insane. But as the days passed, extreme dislike had morphed into grudging admiration, then to something far more intense. And, he had to admit, seeing her tell off Vader like that, talk to the Dark Lord himself without backing down, stand up to him without fear — that had made him even more crazy for her.

However, right now, the only thing that was making him crazy was Padme's older sister. The two were so different, he honestly didn't see how they came from the same family. They had the same rash temper, but that was about it. No sooner had he sprung Sola out of her cell was the woman whining and yelling at him, demanding what was going on.

"And who the kriff are you?" Sola screeched as he all but dragged her down the corridor. "Where the kriff are you taking me?"

"I'm your guardian angel," Jix said dryly. "And I'm getting you outta here." He halted, peered around the corner. Nothing. Good. He tugged the sister along with him around the corner and through another set of doors. They were almost near the underground corridor. He

just hoped Vader was taking care of Xizor so he wouldn't have to deal with a bunch of new guards...

They ran down another corridor, the sister still squawking, and he whirled around, snarling, "Shut up, or you'll get us killed. We're almost outta here."

Sola stared at him with wide eyes, then glared at him. "I don't see why I should be taking orders from a—" But he was already pulling her with him again.

Jix paused in front of a large set of doors, opened them, and raised his gun when he came face to face with a tall, blond woman. The woman glared at him icily with strangely blank eyes. He didn't lower his gun. "Outta my way, Blondie, or I shoot."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "I don't think so."

Before he could fire, she lunged at him, knocking the gun out of his hand. With an impossible speed, she dashed around, yanking his arms back, and kicked him to the ground. He groaned, let out a stream of curses, and jumped to his feet. She came at him again, but he dodged a blow from her and kicked her leg. She blocked it, twisted, and hit him in the nose.

Oh. Yeah, that *hurt*. Dazed, he tried to duck her blow, but she grabbed him by the neck and started to squeeze. He realized suddenly that this woman wasn't human. As he spluttered for breath, he grabbed a small knife out of a leg holster and stabbed her in the stomach. She stumbled back but recovered far too quickly. Then, she drew herself back to her full height and peeled back the sliced part of her clothing around the wound. He watched in horror as she pulled the knife out of her stomach, revealing no emotions, and bent the knife in two. Sola screamed, but Jix barely heard it.

Beneath the woman's layer of skin was metal. Blondie was an android.

"Lemme guess," he said, letting out a cough. "HRD?"

"Yes," replied Blondie. With a small dark grin that sent shivers through his body, she started for him again. But as he prepared himself, a shot rang out, and Blondie stumbled forward. Several shots followed, and Blondie dropped to the floor. Jix looked up and saw Sabe holding a smoking blaster rifle. Her dark red hair was wild and falling into her face, and her eyes were glittering.

Yeah. She was officially the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

"You're late," Sabe said. 'I killed the backup guards, so we're good the rest of the way.' She glanced at Sola, who was stunned, staring at her. "Hey, Sola. How's Darred and the kids?"

Sola's mouth opened, closed, then opened again.

"I guess they're good, then," Sabe said with a small shrug, and stepped over Blondie towards Jix. It was then Jix realized he had blood pouring out of his nose.

"You look stunning," Sabe said matter-of-factly.

"Thanks," he grunted sarcastically, wiping his aching nose. Yep, sexy all right, with a mouth and temper to match. Well, boring girls were no fun. Girls like Padme's sister were even worse. At least Sabe didn't go around screaming her head off. The girl could handle

herself... and a gun, extremely well. Usually when he met girls that could handle guns, they were shooting at him. Sabe hadn't done that yet, but then again, there was still time.

"Sabe!" Sola finally cried. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Saving your sorry hide," Sabe said pitilessly.

"What? How did you... who is THAT?" Sola shrieked, pointing to Jix, who had taken off his vest and was trying to block up bloodflow from his nose with it.

"My future husband," Sabe growled, eyes flashing with irritation. "Now, come on. Let's get going. Vader and Padme should be out soon." She tossed her head back so the hair would get out of her eyes, swept past Sabe and continued on down the corridor, Jix easily matching her pace.

Marriage was something Jix had never thought about, not in a million years, especially after working for Vader, but for a fleeting moment, he wondered how it would be if he were married to Sabe. In a minute of weakness, he allowed himself the thought of himself as a married man. Sabe was different from any woman he'd ever met. She wouldn't tie him down, and she certainly wouldn't get in his way. On the other side, he wouldn't get in her way, either. She as was fiercely independent as he was, a fearless warrior with the heart of a lioness.

His blood sang at his trail of thought, but his feelings quickly dissipated. Who was he kidding? He wasn't the marrying type, and he didn't know if she was, either. She had her own job, her own life on Naboo. All her family was there, he thought, and he couldn't expect her to just up and leave. And leave for what? He never stayed in one place. His apartment was so clean and sparse he doubted if his landlord knew if he was alive or not. He was always on the move, always another mission for Vader. And would she condone him killing people? He was a secret agent, but also a trained assassin.

But she knew what he was, and she didn't seem to mind, anyway. Kriff. This was too messy. But she was so beautiful, so amazing.

He never let his feelings overtake him, since he really didn't give a kriff most of the time, but seeing her stride proudly and boldly beside him, carrying one of the biggest rifles he'd seen, it was too much for the former Gunnery Sergeant. "Hold on a minute," he growled, and pushed her against the wall, kissing her forcefully. Sabe let out a pleased moan and wrapped her free hand around his neck, returning the kiss just as strongly. His whole body burned for her.

"Would you stop MAKING OUT and get us OUT OF HERE!" Sola shrieked furiously.

Jix shot her a glare out of the corner of his eye, and, just to spite her, kissed Sabe again. Sola made a noise of frustration and disbelief, and Jix and Sabe pulled apart. Jix said to Sola, "Maybe we shoulda left you back in that cell, huh, Your Majesty?" His voice dripped with scorn, and he pushed past her towards the exit. He needed to kill something right now, release some of the irritation building up in him. Or, he could just kiss Sabe again...

Sabe easily caught up with his long strides and grinned slyly up at him, leaning her hefty gun on her shoulder. "Actually, I'm the decoy for the Queen. So you can call *me* Your Majesty."

They exchanged warm smirks.

"Sure thing, Queenie. As long as you call me what you called me the other day."

"What, annoying?"

"No..."

"Brainless oaf?"

He shot her a warning look. But, as he suspected, she wasn't fazed. Sola was still huffing angrily behind them, but he completely ignored her. Man, poor Brown Eyes. Having that wench for a sister... and Vader as a boyfriend. Eesh. He'd never met someone with such a knack for getting into impossibly insane situations (and relationships). First Vader, then a bounty hunter, then Prince Xizor of all people... Did the girl have a death wish?

Well, she couldn't help having The Wench as a sister... but maybe he could help her with that. He wondered if Brown Eyes would mind being an only child. Well, that might be a little much. He could just ship her off to Corellia... Now that was a thought. He smirked at the thought of Sola surrounded by a bunch of... well, clones of him, really. Corellian guys didn't differ that much.

"— and when I get out of here," Sola was ranting, "I'm going to make sure that Padme comes home right away and *never* comes back to this hell-hole of a planet ever—"

"Oh, shut up!" Jix snarled, rounding on her. Sola squeaked and stumbled back, her eyes wide. Honestly, though, he didn't give a kriff. "Listen, chick, I don't know who the kriff you think you are, but your little sis ain't a kid no more. You leave her alone and stay the stang outta her life. It's yer fault in the first place that she got into this mess."

Sola glared at him and tried to put on a show by folding her arms over her chest. "My fault? How dare you say that, you insufferable scumbag!"

"Hey," snapped Sabe. "Don't call him that. Only I can call him that."

"Love you too, Red," Jix said dryly.

She then sent him a radiant smile that nearly caused him to stumble and his legs to turn into jelly. *Kriff*, he thought, leading them out of the underground passageway. *Kriff, I'm in deep*. But for some reason, he didn't mind getting in over his head. Not this time.

"We make one heck of a team, you know," Sabe remarked.

He grinned. "Think so, Queenie."

"Yep. Now put a shirt on, Baby, before you give the women in public heart attacks."

When Vader and Padme reached his castle, Vader immediately strode into his large quarters. He made no indication that Padme was to leave him, so, curious and a little apprehensive, she followed him into his chambers. However, this room was not the bedroom — it was a data center with a strange chamber in the center. While she hovered around the odd chamber, he tossed his helmet on a nearby chair and tugged off his cape with a heavy

sigh. Then, to Padme's astonishment, he ripped off the upper half off his armor and belt, leaving a long-sleeved black shirt and his pants and boots. He then moved over to a side table and poured himself a drink — it looked like alcohol. He glanced at her, then grabbed a second glass and poured her a drink. He walked up to her, ignoring her closeness to the odd small chamber, and handed her the glass.

"Here. You need this."

"I don't drink," she said.

He raised an eyebrow. After a pause, she sighed and took the glass from him. He downed his in one large gulp, and as he came back down to swallow, she sniffed and grimaced. Then, she sipped it and coughed violently. His lips twitched, and she glared at him.

"I'm glad you're so amused. I told you I don't drink."

"Right," he said dryly. "Here." He took the glass from her, poured it out in a dispenser, and filled it up with steaming caf. She smiled and took the glass, inhaling deeply and wrapping both hands around the glass.

"Ah. Much better."

He nodded, looking more serious now, and brushed past her towards a large computer console. His back was to her, and as he said nothing further, she meandered around the room, returning once more to the open chamber. It was well lit and only large enough to fit one person seated. There was an array of controls, and a cover to the chamber that fit in with the bottom half.

"What is this?" she finally was bold enough to ask.

He didn't turn around or stop what he was doing. "It's a hyperbaric medical chamber," he said.

"Medical chamber... for what?"

"For me. Before I healed."

"Healed from what?"

He let out a short sigh through his nose, and his shoulders drew back, stretching. He turned to face her, grim and foreboding, and also, she thought, strangely sad. She was making him relive memories he probably wanted to forget. A part of her told her she shouldn't pry... but the larger part was far too curious.

"When I was younger, I had an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"The kind where you fall into a pit of lava. That kind of accident."

Padme stared at him, wide-eyed. "A pit of lava?"

"Yes. I was dueling against my master... part of my training. I lost focus, and like a fool, forgot to pay attention to my surroundings. I ended up too close, and I burned." He flexed his prosthetic arm. "I lost this arm because of it, and nearly my life."

“How did you survive?”

His face grew worn, and he looked away. “I don’t know,” he murmured. After an uncomfortable pause, he moved across the room until he was standing beside her. He placed a hand on the upper portion of the chamber and stared inside. “It took me several years before I was able to breathe on my own again. The suit kept me alive and breathing while I was mobile. And chambers like this one —” He tapped the chamber — “is for when I’m here — or on my ship. It was the only place I could remove my mask and rest. The mechanical devices up there —” He pointed up to the roof of the chamber, where a droid-like device was attached — “took off and replaced my helmet — motion sensor controls. I could only keep the pod open for a small length of time with a breathing tube before I had to close the chamber up again.”

Padme bit her lip and glanced sorrowfully down into the chamber. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

He shot her a sharp, piercing look. “Are you?”

“Yes,” she said firmly, turning to face him. “I am. I hate suffering for all living things.”

“Even me,” he said in a low voice, looking away from her again down into the pod.

“Even you.”

His gaze locked suddenly on hers; and, before she could think, she was feeling that familiar warmth that she had felt the first night they had kissed. He leaned closer, started to say her name, but just before her name finished rolling off his tongue did they hear a beep of a com connection. Vader let out a frustrated hiss, shook his head, and glanced over at the comlink hub. He stiffened immediately.

“What?” she asked.

“The Emperor. I have to take this.” He strode over to his desk chair and slipped on his armor. As he grabbed his helmet and threw his cape over his shoulders, he nodded towards a door behind Padme. “Go through there. It’s the bedroom. Wait until I call you, and you can come back in.”

She nodded and turned, hurrying into his bedroom. While the situation was more than a little awkward, she knew better than to be in sight of the Emperor while he was talking with his most trusted servant. It drove her crazy — having Vader follow the evil old creep like an obedient dog. She then realized that Vader had been replacing his armor specifically for the Emperor’s call. Did the Emperor know that Vader had healed, and that he no longer needed the suit?

Was *she* the only person in the world to see him without his mask?

For some reason, that thought made her surprisingly pleased. Her thoughts overpowered her sense of time; and it seemed a lot sooner than it was when Vader finally called her back into his chamber. When she stepped back inside, she found him in a foul mood. “What’s going on?” she demanded. “What did he say?”

“I killed Xizor,” said Vader grimly. “That didn’t make the Emperor happy.”

Padme bit her lip. “I suppose you could have just... knocked him unconscious.”

“And have him hanging over your head for the rest of your life? No,” Vader snarled. “He’s dead, and now the Emperor’s sending me away.”

“He’s... what?”

“He’s suspicious. I knew this would happen, just...” He ran a hand over his mouth. ‘I didn’t exactly prepare for it as well as I should have.’ He looked down, jaw flexing. “I didn’t intend for things to progress this far,” he added gravely, glancing up at her. “A part of me hoped that you would never want to see me again. It would make things easier for both of us. But then, that piece of slime took you, and I *couldn’t* let him do that.” He shook his head, looking away from her again, and muttered something under his breath.

Padme gazed at him, standing uncomfortably as she listened to the man she knew as Darth Vader actually sound like a semi-regular man for once. Not a murderer, not a Sith Lord, not a ruler of the galaxy. Just a man — a confused, frustrated man. She hadn’t realized how much she was beginning to change him. She honestly thought she had no influence on him at all. After all, she was no one, and he was Darth Vader. But watching him now, she saw that he respected her, thought more of her than she’d thought. And he was concerned about her.

“I’m a dangerous man, Padme,” he said finally, straightening to face her with a grim expression on his hardened face. “As you are well aware. And now, I have to leave before the Emperor questions my late departure.” He strode past her towards the desk where his helmet lay.

“No, wait!” Padme said, yanking him back to face her. “What are you doing? You can’t just... leave!”

“I must.” He turned away and picked up his helmet.

“You can’t! What if someone... like Fett comes after me?”

He gave her a grim smile. “He, or anyone else, won’t bother you again. As long as you remain *here*...” He gave her a pointed look, “You will be safe. At least for now. I won’t be gone long.”

Padme didn’t know what to say. One minute she never wanted to see him again, the next minute she was relieved that he’d shown up to rescue her, and the minute after that, they were exchanging banter like an old married couple. And now he was just up and leaving her, after all she’d been through? After all *they* had been through?

Oh, kriff, she’d never been so confused in her life. She didn’t know what to do, or what to think, or what to feel.

But she did know one thing: the man standing before her had just saved her life. Again. And so far, he was the only person who had ever risked their lives to save hers, regardless of the consequences. He hadn’t stopped until he found her — whether it was because he truly cared about her or because he thought of her as a possession, she wasn’t certain. But if she were only a possession... he would have taken her a long time ago.

That could only mean one thing. He really cared about her. Regardless of his name, his identity, or whether or not he wore a mask, he truly cared about her.

Padme's heart ached as she watched him finish attaching his armor. But before he put on his helmet, he paused, turned around to face her, and came abruptly close. She was unable to hide a small gasp at the speed of his movement. For someone so tall and bulky with the armor, he was extremely agile.

"Goodbye, Padme," he said in a low voice.

She didn't breathe until he'd passed by her. She heard the snap-hiss of his helmet connecting with the neckpiece, and that sound sprang her into action. She whirled around, called: "Wait!"

He paused, glanced back at her.

She licked her lips, took a step towards him. "What's your name?" she asked boldly. "Your *real* name."

Vader hesitated, and his breathing hitched, as if he would speak. But after a prolonged moment, he gave a slight shake of his head and turned sharply away from her, continuing out of the room. The door shut behind him, the sound of it ringing horribly in Padme's ears.

Boba coughed violently as he stumbled through the corridors of Xizor's palace. He could barely breathe from the after-effects of Vader's chokehold, not to mention the hole in his chest. Vader had missed his heart, though — probably too distracted by the brown-eyed chick — but he supposed he should thank her for his life. He just had to get out of here and to the nearest med center.

But as he stumbled through the lower levels of the palace, he came through a set of doors and nearly tripped over a blond woman lying on the floor. She had several blaster wounds in her back, but she was moving. Guri, Xizor's pet HRD. She'd almost killed him. Her eyes were closed, and her breath was shallow. He wondered if she could regenerate herself. But he didn't care. He took out his gun and pointed it down at her.

Then, her eyes opened. To his astonishment, she looked in pain. He didn't know droids could feel.

"Finish it," she rasped, staring up at him. "It's over for me."

Fett hesitated, though he didn't know why.

"Just do it. I've done too... too many things in this life." Her head turned to the side, and her eyes closed.

"You could be reprogrammed."

"I could. But it would take time. Besides, I nearly killed you. There's no reason for you to let me live."

"No, there's not." Other than the fact that she was nearly impossible to defeat, was probably ten times stronger, fast, and more agile than the average person. She might be useful in a fight. And if she were reprogrammed... Well...

His gun wavered, then fell. She shot him a confused look. Grunting, he leaned down and hauled her to her feet. "You're coming with me."

"Why?"

"'Cause I could use back-up. There's someone I gotta kill," he said, gritting his teeth together.

Guri's eyes gazed coolly into his mask. "Vader."

"Vader," he confirmed in a growl.

TBC...

All rightie, if I can keep on track, the next chapter will be a BIG chapter. And you didn't honestly think I could really kill off Boba, did you? Naw... he's too good a character. He's pretty injured, but Vader's suffered through worse. Fett can handle it.

Hope you all enjoyed the Jix/Sabe banter. I can't tell you how much fun I have with those two.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

20. Finding Me

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you SO much, guys! :) I'd just like to say that I'm hugely excited — I've been nominated for best author and best ensemble cast (for my fanfic Alive) on the Force(dot)net's Fanfic Awards! :) I'm SO happy! It's the first time I've been nomed for best author.

***Note:** Again, I'm so happy you guys liked the Sabe/Jix stuff. :D I have SO much fun writing those two. They're the happier couple to counteract all the angst and drama in Padme and Vader's relationship. Which is going to take an interesting turn in this chapter...*

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Twenty: Finding Me

Emperor Darth Sidious, or Palpatine to the galaxy, stared coldly out of his spacious tower window, overlooking the city at the highest point on the entire planet. The landscape stretched out before him, the sunset coloring the buildings shades of crimson, gold, and deep violet. To a normal observer, it would have been breathtaking. But to Sidious, it was not so. It was breathtaking in that he relished in the fact that he controlled the entire vast landscape around him. It was all his, completely his. He had waited so long for this glorious era of pure, complete power... and now, he had it.

However, the sight of the massive city-planet and the knowledge that he controlled it all did nothing to appease his sour mood. For, while he had power and control, he always craved more. And right now, something irked him. Something he had thought to have under control. But apparently, he did not, and that did not sit well with him this evening. Darth Vader, his apprentice.

He knew, although he would never say it, that deep in his heart, that Vader was stronger than he was, and would probably be the most powerful Sith in the history of the legends. He was young, powerful, and strong. His accident had merely set him back, but only somewhat. The mask and the suit had only proved to make him a more deadly and feared commander. As the most intense, the most aggressive and talented student Sidious had had the pleasure of teaching, Vader had shown himself a worthy and fierce Sith apprentice. His raw hunger was unmatched, and the passionate fire in his eyes let Sidious know how far the young man was willing to let himself go, and how he would let nothing get in his way.

It had been refreshing, especially after his former apprentice, Darth Tryannus. Tyrannus had been a rather sentimental, gentlemanly old fool, hardly quality Sith material. Oh, he had been powerful in the dark side, unquestionably, but he was no match for the ruthless hunter Vader. He had enjoyed watching the young man slice off Tyrannus's head with the false arm given to him by Tyrannus. Of course, Sidious had secretly urged Tyrannus to be more vicious with Vader during duels, and seeing the pure, raging hatred on Vader's face after Tyrannus had cut off his arm delighted Sidious very much. Vader had been even more aggressive after that.

However, it had been many years since Tyrannus's death, and several since Vader had been forced to wear the life-support suit. And it seemed to him that over the past few months, Vader had been acting strangely. It hadn't been anything he could put his finger on, but just something... something about his apprentice gave him an odd feeling, one he didn't like. An uneasiness that he hadn't felt for a long time.

The Emperor sat back in his chair, tapped his fingers on the armrest. It had all started with that slip of a girl, that irritating young senator. Now, he had no objections with Vader taking a woman, even one as feisty as Senator Amidala. He would actually enjoy seeing the girl taken down a few notches, even killed at Vader's hand after he'd had his way with her. But Vader had not bedded her... or at least, had not simply taken what he wanted. It was not the way it should have been.

For starters, Vader had purposefully gone to talk to the Senator, even in broad daylight. They would have conversations of the strangest things — at least, those that the Emperor could hear, as not all were recorded with sound. But what he did take away from the few words that were caught on sound was that Vader was not acting himself at all. He was not intimidating the Senator or frightening her or threatening her... or demanding anything from her.

It was all very unusual and most disturbing. He wished he had seen these recordings earlier. He should have kept a closer eye on his apprentice. But Vader was the last man in the galaxy that the Emperor would expect to fall prey to a woman's charms. Vader had never shown an interest in any woman whatsoever. Oh, he had bedded women before, but nothing like this. And certainly not an independent thinker like Amidala.

The comlink beeped, alerting him to an incoming transmission. Irritated, he pressed the receiving button and snapped, "What?"

"Your Majesty," came a nervous voice, "I have some distressing news. I have received a distress signal from His Highness, Prince Xizor. My men have been to his palace. They... they found him dead, Your Majesty. Slaughtered, his head cut off."

"By a lightsaber, no doubt," the Emperor said smoothly, although he felt a dark, knowing anger rising in him, easy and familiar as breathing.

"Y-yes, sir. The Prince's droid is gone, and many of the guards are dead."

The Emperor knew exactly what had happened already. He'd known that Xizor had an interest in the Senator, as well. For what reason, he didn't know. He would have to meet Amidala someday, figure out just what made her so attractive to his closest commanders. Obviously she had something going for her... But that didn't matter. What did matter was the

fact that Vader had risked everything, including his wrath, to take her from Xizor — including killing Xizor in the process. The Emperor wasn't as upset with Xizor's death as he was upset for the reason for it: Senator Amidala.

Vader had grown suddenly erratic, unpredictable, and irrational. This woman was clouding his judgment, and the Emperor could not have that.

There was only one thing left to be done.

"Commander Winston," he said icily, "Take a legion of troops to Lord Vader's castle. There, you will find a young woman by the name of Senator Padme Amidala. Find her, and execute her."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Emperor shut off the link and returned his gaze to the city.

Vader believed that he had sent him on a mission to destroy a Rebel base on the planet in the Mustafar system. However, Vader did not know that the Emperor's devoted servants were waiting for him, ready to ambush him. The servants merely thought the Emperor agreed with them: that Vader was not far enough in the dark side, that he needed to be destroyed. The Emperor had given them instructions to tell Vader that the Senator was dead. Once Vader found out Amidala was dead, he would fly into a vicious rage and kill the dark side servants the Emperor had ordered to lay a trap for Vader. But the servants had no idea of the sheer power of Vader. They would soon find out, however, and the Emperor would regain his servant, who would return to his side, fierce and darkly focused once more.

But Darth Sidious had no idea how much his apprentice had been keeping from him... and how hard and far Darth Vader had fallen for a simple young woman.

Admiral Piett, along with General Veers, were probably the only two commanding officers in the entire Imperial Navy that Vader actually respected. The two men, coincidentally good friends, were fearless, well-disciplined, and incredibly talented officers. They stayed calm and perfectly organized in the field, keeping control of their men, and they never failed to follow orders unquestioningly. However, they were smart, sharp, and knew when another foolish commander was in the wrong — like Admiral Ozzel, for example. Unlike the pompous Ozzel, who had only become Admiral because of his connections, Veers and Piett had made it that far on sheer talent. If it had been Vader's choice, Ozzel wouldn't have made it past ensign.

But as for Piett and Veers, Vader was pleased to serve with them on his ship the *Executor*. Veers led the ground troops, while the Admiral remained on the ship, answering only to Vader.

Both officers waited respectfully for him as he departed his shuttlecraft and saluted.

"Lord Vader," said Piett, "We are ready for take-off and await your further orders. General Veers has already prepared ground troops for assault if necessary."

Vader swept past the two of them, but they knew well enough to join him. "Good," said Vader. "Prepare for lightspeed. We are departing immediately. Admiral Piett, prepare your

men for assault. If it necessary, General Veers will lead his men in a surface attack.”

“My men are ready and waiting on your order, sir,” the Admiral informed him dutifully.

Vader smiled behind his mask. At least someone had sense. “Well done, gentlemen.” The moment they entered the bridge, the Admiral started giving orders to the helmsmen. Vader moved to his customary place near the window and gazed out at Coruscant as it rotated slowly. Against his better judgment, he let his thoughts drift back to the woman he’d left behind. A deep, angry pain sank into his chest, and he grimaced. It had nearly killed him to leave her like that, alone, broken, and upset. He knew she’d wanted to know his real name for some time now. She wanted to know who he really was.

But she’d been right. He honestly didn’t know who he really was anymore. She drove him mad with confusion. If he hadn’t met her, he wouldn’t be in this mess. He wouldn’t be this unfocused right before a battle. He would only have thoughts of destruction and victory on his mind.

But deep down in his heart... the only thing he wanted right now was her in his arms... to hold her until they were both out of breath.

Padme paced the room anxiously, drumming her fingers on her arm. It’d been an hour since Vader had left, and once again, she was left alone with her thoughts and her concerns. She couldn’t help thinking of Vader... of how he had risked the Emperor’s wrath to save her life. Of how he had ripped Xizor to shreds... and of how he had refused to tell her his real identity.

Her head went down, and she let out a shuddering sigh. Crouching down, she gazed at the floor, consumed by the emotions rushing through her. Then, she rose to her feet, growled, “I’m out of here,” and strode out of the room. It was pointless waiting here alone. She had no idea when Vader would be back, and she still had a sister she hadn’t seen. She didn’t care what Vader said — she’d be fine on her own. Not that she had a great track record so far, but Vader wasn’t around to remind her of that.

She hurried down into Vader’s hangar bay and chose the smallest, least noticeable covered speeder and opened the hangar doors. The small speeder rose into the air and took off.

Not seconds after she’d risen into the air, Lord Vader’s castle exploded.

Padme gasped, jerked the speeder forward, and turned it sharply around. “Oh Force...” Vader’s castle was doused in angry flames, continuing to burst into pieces after one explosion after another hit the castle. In mere seconds, the entire massive structure was no longer recognizable. Padme’s heart nearly stopped. Had Bail and his people succeeded? Had they thought Vader was there? Or could it be someone else? Padme was struck with a horrible thought. What if... what if the Emperor had done it? Maybe he had been so furious with Vader for killing Xizor that he’d decided to blow him up... But he must’ve known Vader was on a mission. He had been the one to send Vader on the mission in the first place...

Unless...

The Emperor had been trying to destroy *her*. But how could he have known that she was there, in Vader's protective hold?

Shaken, she turned the ship around and sped towards her apartment. When she reached the open veranda and landed the ship on the small landing pad, she jumped out, rushing through the door to her bedroom and out into the living room, where she found Sola, Sabe, and Jix arguing. Well, mostly Sola arguing with Sabe and Jix. When Padme entered the room, all of them immediately turned to look at her.

"Padme!" Sola shrieked, rushing forward. She took her younger sister's arms and shook her frantically, demanding, "You tell me what the kriff is going on! Where have you been? And why is Sabe telling me that they were helping *Darth Vader*?"

Padme gently but firmly pried her sister's hands off her arms, leaned forward, and hugged her quickly before pulling back. "I'm sorry, Sola. I didn't mean to worry you. I'm fine. And I'm glad you're OK." She looked past her sister to Sabe and Jix. Brushing past Sola, she first embraced Sabe tightly, murmuring, "Thank you so much."

Sabe hugged her back fiercely. "All for you, hun."

Padme then turned to Jix, who looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Uh," he said, realizing what she was about to do, "I'm not the hugging type, Brown Eyes." But Padme just smiled and hugged him, anyway.

"Thank you, Jix," she said warmly. "Thank you so much for everything. You're the best."

Jix patted her back awkwardly, laughing nervously. "No problem, Brown Eyes. Just glad to see you're OK." When she pulled away, he shot Sola a dark look. "Maybe now that you're here, you can shut up the harpie you call a sister."

Sola glared at him, strode forward, and grabbed Padme's arm, yanking her towards her. "What the blazes are you doing, Padme?" she hissed furiously. "Embracing a man like that... he's hardly a man at all! He's a lowlife!"

"Hardly a man, huh?" Sabe said, eyeing Jix up and down. "I'd have to disagree with that."

Jix smiled slowly, gaze burning into her. "I'd like to show you just how much of a man I am, baby," he said devilishly.

Padme's eyes widened, and she reddened at his sensual tone. But glancing at Sabe, she saw that her friend was just as interested in the rugged Corellian as he was in her. Unable to help herself, she grinned and started giggling. "You two seem to be getting along," she said, grateful that something was distracting her from her own tumultuous love life.

"I'd say that's a bit of an understatement," Sabe breathed. She still hadn't taken her eyes off Jix yet. Padme could feel the sexual tension rolling off the pair of them, and she wondered how long it would take them before they grabbed each other and started kissing.

"WOULD YOU TWO CUT IT OUT?" Sola shrieked. "JUST GET A ROOM ALREADY!"

Padme couldn't help it — she laughed again and took a seat. "Oh, Force, you two are fantastic," she sighed, leaning forward in her chair. "I needed this."

Sabe frowned and moved up to her friend, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Padme, I’m sorry... I’m not being very considerate.”

“For once, I agree with you,” Sola hissed, taking Padme’s other side.

“Oh, shut it,” Sabe snapped at her. “The only thing you’re concerned about is your own well-being. If you cared anything about your sister, you would’ve listened to her in the first place and not come to Coruscant. But you’re a selfish, kriffing witch, so it doesn’t surprise me. The only reason I saved your sorry hide is because of Padme. I remember many a time back on Naboo when you liked nothing better than to humiliate me in front of every single noble in the palace, all because a few guys showed interest in me, while you were left sulking on your own. You were always jealous of me and Padme. Not that it matters now, because frankly, I don’t give a kriff what you think. Now that you’re safe, I want you out.”

Sola stiffened and folded her arms over her chest. “You’re not the Queen, although you may act like it,” she said coldly. “You do not tell me what to do. This is Padme’s apartment, and I am her sister, her flesh and blood. As Padme’s older sister, I am responsible for her well-being, and right now, for her sake, I think you and your dog of a boyfriend need to leave. Now.”

Padme, who had been listening to the two of them argue, her head in her hands, suddenly glared up at Sola. “Don’t you *dare* talk about them like that.” Rising from her seat, she stared hard at her sister. ‘Sabe and Jix have done more for me than you ever have or ever will. Blood may be thicker than water, but frankly, I don’t see you caring about your relatives. You just care about yourself. Sabe’s risked everything to save my life. She was almost killed because of your foolishness and lack of respect for me. And Jix has been nothing but a loyal, good friend and has cared for Sabe. That means the world to me.’ Her voice grew choked, and angry tears sprang into her eyes. “And yes, Sola, it’s true. Jix and Sabe were helping Darth Vader save me from Xizor, because I’ve been spending time with Vader for several months now. He’s been a protector, someone I trust... and a good friend.”

Sola had gone white. “A good... friend?” Her voice was low with disbelief. “Padme... this is Darth VADER you’re talking about!”

“I *know who he is!*” Padme screamed. Sola stepped back, startled at her sister’s sudden ferocity. ‘I know exactly who he is,’ Padme continued, her voice shaking. “But through all of this... he’s cared for me. He’s been one of the few people I trust anymore. He’s never hurt me — on the contrary, he’s saved me. He risked everything to save me. Which is more than I can say for you.” Her lips trembled, and she looked away towards the window. “And I don’t know if I’ll ever see him again,” she finished quietly.

“What are you talking about?” Jix demanded. “What’s going on?”

Padme moved to the window and stared out of it distantly. “He had to leave. More Rebels. If it’s Bail’s people, he might be in trouble. His castle blew up just as I was leaving... I think it might have been Bail’s soldiers that did it.”

“Damn,” Sabe breathed. “You’re all right?”

“Fine. But someone’s going through a lot of trouble to kill him,” said Padme bitterly. “And he’s only one man. I don’t know what Bail has in store for him.”

“Why should you care?” Sola sneered. “Why should you even care two twits about what happens to him?”

Padme swallowed, paused. “I love him,” she blurted out, startling herself. Jix and Sabe both stared at her but said nothing, watching her as she came to the realization. Sola’s mouth fell open, but she said nothing, either. ‘I love him,’ Padme whispered. “I love him... I love him.” Tears dripped down her cheeks as she pressed a hand to her aching heart. Sabe started for her, but Jix held her back, murmuring something in her ear. Sola still hadn’t moved, apparently too stunned for words. However, she found her tongue the next moment.

“You... you’re insane,” Sola whispered. “You’re *insane*!”

Tears streamed down Padme’s face, but her gaze grew distant and dreamy. “Yes,” she said softly. “I am.” She turned and left the room without another word, entering out onto the terrace, where the rising moon shone bright, and the twilight stars glittered over her head.

Padme gazed up at the stars. She shouldn’t love him. It wasn’t right. He was a murderer. A Sith Lord. They were complete opposites in every way. She wasn’t supposed to love him. Had fate brought them together? Had fate meant for her to fall in love with a dark lord? But dark lords weren’t supposed to love. They didn’t love. Love had no room in their hearts. But deep in her heart, she knew that he loved her. In his strange own way... he loved her. No one had done as much for her as he had. Despite his deceitfulness, despite his cruelty and his malice, there was a part of him screaming to get out. A part of him no one else saw. A part only she knew existed.

When he returned, she would unlock that part.

And, for the first time in many months, a dreamy look crossed her face. She smiled faintly. “You’re my wish of fire,” she said distantly.

The planet of Mustafar. It was a dark, lava-filled planet, inhospitable to any life. A strange place for the Rebels to take him, but not completely unreasonable. It was far out of the way — there was no reason for anyone to go there, other than the miners to collect the lava rock. It actually made sense... but that didn’t mean he was thrilled with the idea of being near lava again. He recalled the last time he was here and felt a dark spurt of anger. This had been the place where he had ended the disgusting officials of the Trade Federation. Slimy lot, all of them.

But if there were one planet he would never return to, this would not be it. Another held more hatred in his heart, a planet of rock and sand and creatures that had no use at all. A place where he had lost his arm and nearly his life at the hand of Tyrannus. His metal hand clenched furiously as memories came rushing back to him. The heat... the dust... the dark cavern... the flashing of crimson sabers... the pain as Tyrannus severed his hand... the crushing blow of the rocks overhead as Tyrannus sent them crashing down on his lungs...

Vader turned sharply and strode up to the Admiral. “Report.”

“My lord,” said the Admiral crisply, “We have located a base on the planet surface. It’s not big, but we are picking up several life forms. However, the heat is making it difficult for our sensors to get a clear reading. Shall I inform General Veers to deploy his troops?”

Vader didn't know why, but he had a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach. "No. I will deal with it myself. If I require assistance, I will contact you. Tell the General to ready his men if need be."

"Certainly, My lord." The Admiral nodded shortly.

Vader swept past him and entered the hangar bay. The queasiness in his stomach had not abated, but he didn't know why. As he entered the planet's atmosphere, he gazed at the spewing lava pits and rivers running red-hot with yellow liquid. Although he was used to extreme temperatures, he was more used to sand and sun, not this. When he reached the base, he landed his ship on a patch of gravel and rock hidden from sight of the base. But oddly enough, he didn't pick up many life forms.

The moment Vader's boot touched the ground of the planet, he had a bad feeling about it. The Rebels were sneaky and deceitful, willing to use any tactics necessary to attain their goals, but this felt... off. The lava spewing at him from all sides made him uneasy and on edge as he made his way around the mountain to the base of the Rebels' hideout. However, as he reached higher ground, he suddenly felt a darkness reach him.

Out of the shadows stepped a cloaked figure. Then another. Then another. Vader turned and found himself surrounded by eight cloaked men. The first stepped forward and gently pulled back his hood. He wore black clothing, and his skin was pale, and his hair a contrasting dark. His eyes, however, were blood-red and gleamed evilly at Vader.

"Lord Vader," he said in a quiet sneer. "How kind of you to join us. We were afraid you wouldn't show up."

This was no Rebel attack. It was a trap.

"Servants of the dark side," Vader growled. "The Prophets."

"Correct," said the man with a nod. "I am Sedriss."

"You *were* Sedriss," Vader hissed, igniting his lightsaber. "But you will soon be just another corpse."

Sedriss smiled wickedly. "I believe you are speaking of yourself, Vader." He ignited his own lightsaber, and the others did the same. 'You have grown weak, Lord Vader,' Sedriss continued. "You are not worthy to be called the Emperor's apprentice. We must end you so he may make way for another."

"That is not your decision to make," Vader said darkly. "That is the Emperor's."

Sedriss just grinned, crouched down, ready to fight. "Good-bye, Lord Vader." And at once, all of them charged, lightsabers swinging high over their heads. They came crashing down on Vader, who whipped his lightsaber around, jumping up in the air. He blocked one man's cut, sliced through another, before landing on the ground. They came at him again, lightsabers twirling, and surrounded him from all sides. Vader felt one lightsaber slash through his arm, but he turned sharply and cut off the man's arm at his shoulder. Another got in another wound in his leg, and he gathered the dark energy and sent it charging at the man, who fell back with a cry, splashing into the lava. Two down, six more to go.

The battle lasted for far too long, until it was only Vader and the leader, Sedriss, dueling fiercely on the rocky ground. Both had sustained injuries; however, Vader's were far worse, and Sedriss did not have a suit to bear him down. Vader Force-shoved him back into the rocks and came at him, but Sedriss dodged the blow and cut Vader's side. Vader groaned, turned just in time to block Sedriss' jab. He parried, then sliced his saber across Sedriss' left shoulder, but the man blocked it and side-stepped, attempting to cut his leg. Vader twisted around, ignoring his screaming muscles and weakening strength, and yelled, unleashing the last bit of energy left in him. Sedriss shot back, tumbling to the ground. Vader Force-grabbed his saber and held it against Sedriss' neck, breathing heavily. He nearly stumbled but managed to stay on his feet on the uneven ground.

"You are finished," Vader panted.

Sedriss chuckled weakly, a bloody grin on his face. "You may think you have won, Lord Vader... But even if you survive your wounds... you have already lost."

Vader stared at him, a horrible feeling taking him. "What are you talking about?" he rasped, finding it hard to breathe. He knew he was losing blood quickly, and his vision was wavering. Eight men against one, even one as strong as he, was a difficult challenge.

Sedriss' grin widened. "Did you really think we wouldn't have another plan in store for you? Even if we did not finish you... we finished what seems to be so important to you."

No... Kriffing hells, no... Vader felt the blood draining from his face. His arms started shaking.

"That's right," Sedriss croaked. "Your precious little Senator is *dead*, Vader. While you were fighting us, she was taken care of. The Emperor himself... commanded it... You were... too distracted... from your path..."

"You're *lying*!" Vader roared, ramming him across the face with the hilt of the saber.

Sedriss just laughed again. "You feel it, I know. She was such a pretty thing, too... those brown eyes were so bewitching on the holo-image that the Emperor sent me... But now... the eyes are lifeless. Empty." His laughing grew wilder. "Such a beautiful corpse!" he shouted hoarsely, his eyes becoming more maniacal. "So pale..."

"*NO!*" Vader roared, and stabbed Sedriss in the chest with both sabers. Sedriss' laughter died away, but the mad grin on his face remained, his lifeless red eyes staring up unseeingly at Vader.

But the dark feeling in his chest would not disappear. Gasping for breath, he lurched forward and let the lightsabers drop to the ground. He took out his comlink, coughing. "Ad-Admiral," he rasped. "Report."

"Lord Vader, are you all right?"

"Contact my palace on Coruscant," Vader ordered weakly. "Tell them to... to find... there's a... a woman..." He blinked, swaying dizzily.

"My Lord! My lord, your palace has been destroyed," the Admiral said anxiously. "I was attempting to contact you, but I could not — our communications were jammed —"

"Destroyed? *What do you mean, destroyed?*"

"It was bombed, my lord," the Admiral said gravely. "I only just learned of it. I... I'm sorry, My Lord."

But Vader wasn't even listening. Padme... Padme... She was... She was in the palace... She had been in the castle.. He had ordered her to stay there and wait for him...

"I... I told her to wait..." he mumbled, letting the comlink drop from his hands.

"My lord? My lord! Lord Vader!" the Admiral shouted. "Are you all right?"

Despair, dark despair, unlike anything he had ever felt before, ripped through his chest.

"*PADME!*" Vader screamed.

But he was too late. She was dead. The only woman he had ever loved... was gone.

And so would the Emperor, if he had his way.

He stumbled forward, his vision blurring, and fell on his knees on the rocky ground. The air left his lungs in hoarse, rasping pants. For the first time in his life, defeat and utter despair overwhelmed his senses. And for the first time, Darth Vader broke down in tears and collapsed to the ground.

Padme was curled on her bed, dozing, when she heard her comlink beeping. She frowned, blinked and rubbed the tiredness from her eyes, and picked it up. She didn't recognize the number. "Hello?" she said groggily.

"Is this a Miss Padme?" said a polite male voice.

"Yes," she said, wondering why she felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Who's this?"

"My name is Admiral Piett, Milady. And I... well, I serve directly under Lord Vader."

Padme's eyes widened, and her hand started shaking. She sat up quickly, now completely awake. "What's going on? Is he all right?"

"I'm afraid not, Milady," the Admiral admitted with a sigh. "It appears as though he's been attacked. We picked him up on Mustafar, but he was unconscious. He's been in and out of consciousness since then, and the sedatives don't appear to be working as well as they should." He paused to let the words sink in, to give her a moment to think.

Padme slumped onto her bed, breathing heavily. No. No, it wasn't possible... He was Darth Vader... he was practically invincible... He...

"He's been asking for you, Milady," the Admiral finished quietly. "He has been constantly calling your name. I checked the numbers on his comlink and saw that you were one of them. Forgive me, but this is extremely urgent. I've sent a shuttle to pick you up. It should be arriving within the hour."

Padme sucked in a breath and tried to remain calm. "All right. I'll be ready. Thank you, Admiral."

A pause, then, "You're welcome."

The link ended, and, in a daze, she rose to her feet and entered the kitchen, where she found Sabe and Jix sitting at the table and eating. Sola was not to be found, but Padme supposed she was sleeping in the guest quarters. When Sabe and Jix saw her, they both rose to their feet. But she waved them to sit back down, which they did so reluctantly. "I have to leave," Padme said. "Vader's been hurt. He's asking for me."

"Whoa, wait, I'm coming with you," Jix said, rising again.

"No. He just asked for me. You stay here... with Sabe. I need to see him. Please understand, Jix," Padme urged gently.

Jix stared at her hard, then nodded, sighing. "All right, Brown Eyes. Just call if you need anything."

"I will. Thank you." She smiled at her friend. "I'll see you soon." Turning, she reentered her bedroom, changed her dress to a more practical outfit of deep brown pants, a blood-red, form-fitting top, and a thin, tan jacket over that. She slipped on a pair of dark brown boots and pulled the front of her hair back, letting the bulk of it fall down in its thick, chestnut curls. Putting on a pair of gloves, she inhaled deeply and stepped out onto the patio, waiting and letting her mind wander.

"They're beautiful, aren't they? Like crystal lights. Or wishes of fire."

"I hardly know," he replied.

"Let's pretend that for one night, for one moment, neither of us is who we are. Let's say..." She turned again and leaned back on the railing. "I'm a daring smuggler off the southern rim, and you..." She looked at him. "Who are you going to be?"

"I..."

"All right," she said with a smile. "I'll make something up. You're... a pilot."

"That isn't very interesting."

"Fine. A racer pilot. One of the best. You've just won the Metellos World Trophy, but you want more gritty races. Like in the outer rim. That's how we met."

"Indeed."

"Yes. Let's say... you needed a certain part for your ship. But it wasn't legal. So you had me smuggle in the part and agreed to give me a share of the winnings."

"I highly doubt I would hire a smuggler for an illegal ship part."

She laughed. "But that's why," she said playfully, "it's called pretending."

Padme gazed up distantly at the stars, leaning back on the cushions. "We're not pretending anymore," she said softly.

One of the bright stars grew suddenly closer and brighter, until it formed into the shape of a small vessel. The ship sped down towards her and alighted gently on the terrace. The door slid open, and an Imperial officer stepped out, bowing before her respectfully.

“Milady,” he said. “Are you Senator Amidala?”

Padme rose to her feet, trying desperately to ignore the way they trembled precariously beneath her. “I am.”

“An honor, Milady. I am General Veers. Now, if you’ll please come with me... We must leave at once.” He held out a hand, which she took, and led her into the small shuttle. Once inside, he gave a short order to the pilot, and the ship took off into the night sky. Padme stared out the window, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Space is cold,” she muttered.

“Yes, it is. The flagship will be warmer, I assure you,” Veers said, taking a seat opposite her. They didn’t speak after a while, but finally, she turned to him gravely.

“How is he?”

Veers’ calm expression didn’t change. “He is undergoing surgery. Or should be very soon. The doctors are attempting to sedate him... or were, the last time I checked. But he is most stubborn, unfortunately.”

“You didn’t answer my question, General,” she said softly. “How is he?”

Veers sighed, looked away. “Not good,” he admitted. “I’ve never seen him so badly injured.”

“You sound as though you respect him,” Padme observed.

“He is a good commander,” Veers said with a nod. “He demands nothing but perfection and order from all who serve under him. He is a ruthless warrior, the finest I have ever seen. But not unreasonable. I am proud to serve under him, Milady. He asks for nothing that a good leader would not ask his subordinates. Those who incur his wrath usually deserve their punishments.”

“Even death?”

“Perhaps not,” conceded Veers. “But on a massive ship like the Executor, one mistake, even the smallest, could mean the death of hundreds of our men. I’ve seen it before many times. On the whole, those who made mistakes cost us many men, men that did not need to die. Lord Vader’s anger was justified.”

Padme studied him closely. “You aren’t afraid of him?”

“He is... intimidating, to be sure,” Veers said carefully. ‘But those who have served him loyally know of his talents.’ He paused, looking suddenly awkward. “Forgive me, Milady,” he said hesitantly... “But I did not expect Lord Vader to...” He trailed off and glanced away.

“Expect him to ask for someone like me?” she finished gently. “Don’t feel embarrassed, General.”

“It’s none of my business,” he said quickly. “Forgive me.”

“No, it’s all right. I know it’s strange. He’s not exactly a ladies’ man,” she said, smiling weakly.

"No," he concurred. "But... if I may say this... I have never heard him speak of someone more passionately than he does of you. I have never seen him like this," he admitted quietly.

Padme bit her lip and returned her gaze to the window. The ride felt as though it was taking forever.

When they arrived in one of the shuttle bays, she was met by a fine-looking man in a crisp olive uniform. He nodded shortly to the General, who nodded to Padme and excused himself.

"Admiral Piett?" Padme said uncertainly.

"A pleasure, Milady," he said, bowing shortly. Offering his arm, he said, "We don't have much time. Please, come with me."

She instantly took his arm and allowed him to lead her through the massive ship, down several corridors, and up a turbolift. She said nothing, too nervous and upset, and he seemed to understand her tension and thus said nothing. They finally reached the medical bay, and the Admiral stepped inside.

"He's in here," Piett told her gently, ushering her into the medical bay. There was an operating room through a doorway, and a large window through which one could look through into the operating room.

Her heart racing, Padme released his arm, hurried into the crisp, white operating room and stopped short at the sight of Darth Vader lying on a medical bed. The doctor was in the process of injecting him with pain killers, his back to her. Vader's breathing, she noticed at once, was raspy and weak... as if he were really having trouble breathing instead of his normally mechanized sound. She entered in further and felt sick when she saw him covered in blood. But it wasn't someone else's blood... It was his own. She saw it leaking out from many wounds all over his body.

Vader rasped weakly, helmeted head turning from side to side in short, agonized movements. His fingers twitched, and his chest heaved, but his breaths were short. Biting back tears, she moved forward. But she couldn't help it: she felt hot, salty water burning the inside of her eyes, threatening to drop out. She crept up to his beside, ignoring the quizzical, sharp look of the doctor. She stared down at him, emotions riling in her, but he didn't say anything. She didn't know if his eyes were open or not. She reached down and grasped his metallic hand. The glove had been ripped to shreds, and parts of the singed metal hand peeked out through the openings.

As soon as she touched him, his hand spasmed, and his breathing shifted. Now, she knew his eyes were open.

"Padme," he groaned. "Padme..."

"It's all right," she whispered. "I'm here. I'm here." Her other hand reached up and touched the side of his mask. It was burning hot, but she left her hand there.

"You're... alive..."

"I'm alive," she told him. "I'm not going anywhere."

“No... you’re not real... you’re dead...”

“No, I’m right here. Look at me,” she urged, leaning down towards him. “I’m here. I’m alive.”

She heard an odd sound coming from his mask vocoder. And, to her astonishment and horror, she realized that it sounded like a sob. Vader started shaking and breathing more rapidly. Oh, Force... He was crying, she realized, tears springing in her eyes. He was *crying*.

“*Padme*... take... take my mask... off.”

Padme’s hands moved towards his mask, but the doctor cleared his throat.

“But Lord Vader,” the doctor said, looking none too pleased at Padme’s presence, “We must get you into your oxygen-rich chamber — you cannot take it off while—”

“Leave,” Vader snarled. “Leave me...”

“But sir!”

“Doctor,” said Admiral Piett firmly, entering the room. “I must ask you to come with me. You will return when Lord Vader requests you.”

“But he’s injured!” the doctor objected. “I can’t just leave him — not with all his wounds like this!”

“Leave,” Vader hissed weakly.

The Doctor shot Padme a glare, but muttering under his breath, left the room into the adjoining medical chamber, Piett right behind him. Once they were alone, Padme returned her gaze to him, stroking his metallic hand with her thumb.

“Take it off, Padme,” Vader breathed. “Take it off.”

Padme nodded, knowing that tears were already running down her cheeks. She released his hand reluctantly and lifted off the top part of his mask. Then, shifting his head gently up, she peeled off the front of the mask, sucking in a choked breath when she saw his face — streaked with blood and sweat and tears. But his eyes... his eyes were the brightest blue she had ever seen. Though filled with tears, both unshed and shed, they had never gleamed more brightly than they did now. They took her breath away. She blinked rapidly, then reached behind his neck and unclasped his neckpiece, freeing his breathing. She let it drop to the ground and stared down at him through watery eyes.

Vader gazed up at her, his breaths choppy and short, but his trembling hand reached up and touched her cheek, his metallic fingers brushing it gently. Padme gripped his hand and pressed it against her face as more tears streamed down her cheeks. His eyes flickered shut, and she knew that they didn’t have long before the doctor needed to get back and help him.

It felt like forever before he spoke. “Padme,” he rasped. “My name... My name... is Skywalker.”

Her lips parted in shock. “*What did you say?*” she whispered in disbelief.

“My name,” he said, taking in a staggering breath, “is *Anakin Skywalker*.”

TBC...

So, yeah... I've been planning that last part and running it through my mind pretty much throughout this whole story.

I'm sad to say that we're drawing to a close... two more chapters at the most. Maybe one. Not sure yet.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

21. Free Fall

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you SO much, guys! :) I'm so thrilled you all liked the last chapter. It was definitely one of my favorite chapters to write. I was sniffing as I was writing that last scene.

ALSO! I was reading back and realized that I had made up two different stories concerning Anakin's loss of hand and his suit. The real story is he lost his arm in a duel with Count Dooku, who then Force-shoved rocks onto Anakin's body, which crushed his lungs. He never went to Mustafar and got burned by lava. Just so you know. I'm sorry I didn't catch that. Oooooops.

***Note:** Wow, really, this story is almost done. I'm going to tell you right now, though — the Emperor will NOT die in this story. I just have to let you know. This story is setting up for the sequel, which I'm almost a hundred percent sure will take place during the Original Trilogy, focusing on the consequences of Anakin's betrayal.*

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Twenty-One: Free Fall

"I never thought I'd see my best friend fall in love with Darth Vader."

"Join the club."

"And I *never* thought that I'd see her stand up to anyone like that."

"Join the club."

"And I *never* thought that I'd like a Corellian scruffy gunnery sergeant with a bad attitude."

"Join the... gee, thanks," Jix growled, shooting Sabe a glare. "I do not have a bad attitude. If anyone has a bad attitude, Red, it's you."

"Will both of you SHUT UP? Where the hell did Padme go?" Sola shrieked, who had been pacing the room non-stop since Padme had left. "I can't believe you just let her go off to declare her crazy affection for a mass murderer! He's Darth Kriffing Vader! Are you all out of your kriffing minds? Someone had better take me to see Padme NOW!"

Jix and Sabe glared at her, then looked at each other.

"I take it back," said Jix. "*She's* the one with a bad attitude."

Sola's eyes narrowed. She marched up to Jix and reached a hand back to slap him, but Jix caught her hand and clucked his tongue, shaking his head condescendingly.

"Ah, ah, ah. Don't mess with the gunnery sergeant," Jix tsked. Although his voice was light and teasing, there was no mistaking the deadly gleam flashing precariously in his dark eyes. Sola swallowed, stepped back nervously, and, once Jix released her, rubbed her wrist and shot nervous looks to Sola.

"Get me Padme," she said in a shaky voice, "And get me the hell out of here."

"The latter, yes," Jix said. "The former — sorry, no can do. But I'd be more than happy to watch you pack your bags and leave on the earliest transport back to Naboo. I'll even pay for it if you leave within the next hour. I..." He trailed off, and his head tilted towards the front door. Sabe opened her mouth to say something, but Jix held up a hand to his lips and crept towards the door, slipping his gun out of his holster. When Sola started to say something, Sabe dashed up to her and wrapped a hand over her mouth, waiting tensely as Jix reached the door.

Jix put his ear against the wall and stepped back. Everything was silent for a few moments.

Then, the door burst open, and several men came barreling through. Sola shrieked under Sabe's hand; and Jix slammed his gun on the head of the first man, then whirled around, using him as a shield, and shot the next few men who couldn't reach him due to their comrade's unwilling interference. Sabe shoved Sola down, whipped out her own gun, and shot the next two men that entered. Jix hauled the dead man he'd used to his feet, pushed him towards the several remaining men, and fired a few quick rounds, using the dead man's gun as well as his own. As the last man went down, he heard a click and turned his gun towards one of the men he'd shot that was lying on the floor and pointing a gun at him. However, Sabe fired off a couple of shots, and the injured man was dead.

Once again, the room was silent, save for the labored breaths of Jix and Sabe and the whimpering sobs of Sola.

"I think it's time to leave," remarked Jix grimly as he wiped his gun.

Sabe brushed off her dress and angrily eyed the dead men in the apartment. "I'd say I have to agree with you. For once."

Jix shot her a look, hauled Sola to her feet, and muttered to Sabe, "Someone went through a lot of trouble to take out your friend's apartment. Since Xizor's gone... I'm going to say there's only one other person who'd want Brown Eyes dead. Someone who wouldn't want their trusted go-to guy falling for some senator, you know what I mean?"

Sabe paled, ignoring Sola's whimpers, and stared at him with wide eyes. "You don't think..."

"Yeah, I do. This guy's the most heartless bastard in the galaxy, Red. Vader's a white knight compared to him, and I mean that completely seriously. There's nothing this guy won't do to get what he wants. Trust me. If Palpatine wants Padme dead... she's dead."

Sabe swallowed. "We have to leave. Now."

The surgery had been going for two hours now, and Padme was exhausted. She sat in the entry room of the medical bay, staring blankly at the wall facing her, while to her left, through the window, the surgeon and his droids worked on Vader. While overtired and wearied, both mentally and physically, Padme felt an odd sense of peace. She knew she should've been more anxious, but right now, all she could focus on were two simple words Vader had said to her. Just one simple, insignificant name.

Anakin Skywalker. Skywalker. Walk the sky.

Definitely not a violent name, she thought distantly. Quite the opposite of 'Starkiller.' Skywalker was such a... such an amazing name. It inspired a breath of air to rush to her lungs, her heart rate to rise, and a warmth she had never felt to seep into her bones, calming her, making her feel as though she could do anything — touch the stars... or walk the sky. She was flying on air, and she never wanted to come back down.

Her gaze flickered to the operating room, but she couldn't tell if they were close to being done or not. She heard the door to the bay open, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw a steaming metallic mug being offered to her.

"You look as though you could use a cup of coffee," said Admiral Piett quietly.

Padme blinked, drawn out of her trance-like state, and smiled faintly up at him, taking the cup. "Is it good coffee?"

"Good Force, no," snorted Piett, taking a seat beside her. Padme laughed and shook her head, drinking the coffee anyway. She licked her lips and shrugged.

"You're right. That's pretty bad." She started laughing again, and he smiled. They sipped their cups in silence for several minutes, and Piett glanced to the operating room.

"I think they're almost done," he said softly.

Padme's gaze turned towards the room, and she sat up straighter in her seat to see what was going on. Piett was right; the surgeon was putting away his medical tools, and the droids looked like they were cleaning up. "I think you're right."

Another pause, then, Piett said hesitantly, "I hope you don't mind me saying... but he's not at all what I pictured."

She smiled weakly at him. "I know. Expecting an old, wrinkled, disfigured man?"

"Something like that. I wasn't even sure if he was human or not."

"I know." She glanced at the operation room again and sighed, fingering her coffee cup. "Look, Admiral —"

"Firmus, please, Milady. I think considering the situation, you can dispense with the formalities."

“Firmus,” she said. ‘I know this is all strange and unexpected... and I know you’re probably thinking that I’m... rather insane for getting into a relationship with Darth Vader... but... I’m not some... hooker or something,’ she finished, shifting awkwardly. “I’m not after his money, or his power, or... anything else. It’s... not exactly a normal relationship.”

“I wasn’t thinking that,” said Piett gently. “And you don’t have to explain anything to me. Lord Vader is my commander, but his private life is just that: private. I would never assume anything. And honestly, Milady, you are the farthest thing from a prostitute. Anyone could see that.”

“Padme, please,” she said. ‘After everything that’s happened... I’m not really sure I could go back to the way it was.’ She took another sip of her coffee, slightly shook her head. “He’s very fortunate to have such loyal officers as you and General Veers. I don’t think...” She paused. “I don’t think I have to ask if you’ll keep my presence here... discreet.” She looked at him earnestly, hoping that he and Veers hadn’t told anyone already. She still didn’t know if it had been Bail’s people that had blown up Vader’s (*Skywalker*’s) castle, or someone... much closer to the dark lord.

Piett nodded firmly. “Milady, the only people that know of your presence on this ship are myself, the General, and the Doctor. I don’t think Lord Vader would be pleased to know that the entire ship is aware of your arrival. I assure you, we are going to keep this quiet for as long as possible.”

“Thank you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything.”

“It is an honor to serve, Milady.”

“*Padme*,” she reminded with a gentle smile.

Piett’s stern eyes softened. “Lady Padme.”

Padme smiled, knowing he wouldn’t simply say her name, and looked over to the door to the operation room when the Doctor stepped through the doorway. He pulled off his mask, shooting a disdainful look to Padme, and spoke only to Piett.

“He’ll be fine. Just needs a lot of rest. I’m going to put him in the bacta tank, but he needs to sleep a bit before we do that. I want to make sure he’s able to sit up, basic things like that. But the tank will help with the wounds.”

“Were his internal injuries bad?” Piett asked solemnly.

The Doctor snorted. “Admiral, this man’s lucky to be alive. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“How long before he goes into the tank?” Padme asked.

The Doctor shot her a dark look. “I’m not pushing anything.”

Piett stiffened and stepped closer to Padme. “I’ll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head, Doctor,” he said coldly. “And show respect for the Senator.”

The Doctor didn’t look happy at all with that, but he forced a note and gritted out, “Several hours. He needs sleep.”

“Can I go in there?” She asked quietly.

The Doctor opened his mouth, probably to say something disrespectful, but from a sharp look from Piett, he said stiffly, “We’re moving him to the recovery room now.” He motioned behind him to where two droids were pushing the hover-bed out of the room and through a doorway into the adjoining recovery room. “Just don’t try to wake him up or disturb him.”

“That’s the last thing I would do,” Padme assured him. “Thank you for taking care of him, Doctor.”

“It’s why I was hired. Excuse me.” The Doctor pushed past her, but Piett stopped him before he left and muttered some words in his ear. Padme didn’t stay to find out what the Admiral was saying, but she caught some of it. Piett was warning the Doctor not to say anything about her to anyone else, or the consequences would be severe. Turning, Padme entered the recovery room and pulled up a chair next to Vader’s bed.

He was sleeping, his chest gently rising and falling, and she was relieved to hear his breaths slow and even. His hair had been washed and lay partially damp on the starch white pillow and across his forehead. His battle-hardened face wasn’t what she would call peaceful, but more of a darker, sterner realization that things had changed, that he would survive and continue on the fight. His real hand was curled up into a loose fist, and his metallic hand was lying flat against the bedding. His tone, broad chest was bare, littered with white bandages and many battle scars.

Padme smiled faintly, brushed away some wavy dark blond bangs from his face, and lightly touched his prosthetic hand. It twitched, but he didn’t wake. Careful not to touch him too hard, she delicately traced the scars on his chest.

So many, she thought. She wondered what each one was from, and blushed when she thought of asking him when he woke up. With all of his new bandages, he’d have many more. But she didn’t mind. It actually made him more... attractive. Her cheeks grew hot, and her fingers twitched instinctively against his warm skin.

He sighed, moved his head slowly, and shifted in his bed. She pulled away hastily, guilty for having woken him up. She bit her lip, wondering what the doctor would say if he saw her. He’d probably have her head. Anakin groaned softly, licked his dry lips, and carefully opened his eyes. His drowsy eyes blinked a few times, finally focusing on her.

“You didn’t have to stop,” he mumbled groggily.

Padme thought she would die from embarrassment. Covering her face with her hand, she sighed, almost a whimper. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you up,” she whispered.

“I didn’t mind,” he murmured. ‘First time I was ever woken up like that.’ His eyes drifted shut. “I could get used to that.”

She smiled, still shamefully red. “I should go. Let you sleep,” she whispered.

His eyes opened, and he turned his head towards her. “No. Don’t go. Your presence is soothing.” His prosthetic hand inched towards her, and she reached forward and took it in her own small one, brushing her thumb of the top of his hand gently.

“All right,” she replied softly. “But you need to sleep.”

“I am at your command... Smuggler.” A faint smile twitched on his lips, and his eyes slid shut once again. She smiled and watched as his breaths grew deep and even, and in less than thirty seconds, he was asleep.

But Padme didn’t realize how tired she was. Within five minutes, her head and upper body rested on his beside, her hand still clasped in his, and she drifted off into unconsciousness.

It smelled like home. The soft, fresh wind whispering through her tresses, the scent of the thick, lush trees, the feel of the warm, pleasant sun on her skin... the feel of the thick, green grass that swayed in the gentle breeze...

She was home.

She opened her eyes, inhaled deeply, and gazed out at the billowing grass, like the southern sea not too far off. In the distance, towering mountains sloped up and down, and before that lay the deep blue water lapping against the wind. She stepped, bare-footed, on the grass and reached the stone terrace, the rock cool against her feet. She rested her hands lightly on the elegant railing and smiled.

She missed this.

Then, a shadow behind her, a presence she’d felt in her dreams before. She didn’t turn — she knew who it was. She waited, a rush of anticipation trilling through her body. She let out a short, quiet breath of air as she felt a warm set of fingers whisper across her bare back, trailing down her spine, then running up near her shoulders. Her eyes flitted shut as the hand curled into her thick hair and massaged her neck and the back of her head, then gently urged her to turn her body.

She twisted around and faced Anakin Skywalker. His eyes, that startlingly brilliant blue, were darker and hooded, but oddly gentle. This was the man she had fallen in love with. This was the true Darth Vader, the man behind the mask. A mix of the face and the character she had come to love when he wore the mask stood before her, darkly clothed as always, looking perfectly healthy, unlike in the real world.

“You’re here,” she whispered.

He stepped closer until he nearly pressed himself against her and brushed his hand across her cheek. “I’m here.” He bent down, warmly pressed his lips to her forehead, and slipped his arm around her waist, turning her back to face the water. “What is this place?” he murmured. “I’ve never dreamed of this before.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” She smiled and pressed her head against his neck. “It’s home.”

“It is beautiful.” His hand squeezed her side gently. “It’s you.”

Her fingers entwined with his, and she sighed. “I always wanted to get married here, you know,” she remarked dreamily. “A white, lace dress. A crimson sunset. Nobody else there. Just a nice, small, simple wedding. But those were just dreams. I never thought I would actually get married.”

“Why not?”

“Work. Or murder,” she remarked in a far-off voice. “I always had this feeling that I would be assassinated.”

His grip tightened on her. “Don’t say things like that.”

“You’re one to talk. You were almost killed.” Her throat hitched. “What happened down there? Who did this to you?”

“I’d rather not talk about it. We can talk about it when we’re awake. Not here. It will ruin it.”

“All right. So what do you want to talk about?”

“You.”

“How boring,” she laughed. He pressed another kiss to her hair.

“Me,” he murmured. “Us.”

She paused, felt a flutter through her chest. “What about us?”

“Yes, what about us?” he whispered in her ear.

She turned in his arms, placed her hands on his shoulders. “Anakin... answer me this question. Who are you?”

Anakin gazed at her long and intensely. Finally, he answered, “I am the man who loves you, Padme Amidala. I was born a slave. Orphaned at seven. Created into a servant of the dark side, and turned into a cold-blooded killer. I’ve known nothing but darkness, Padme. My mother died in poverty and despair. I was taken by a master who beat me for his own pleasure and forced to fight a man over twice my age until I was bloody and battered, lying on the ground. My only comfort, my only strength, and my only hope was revenge.” His hands tightened on her waist, and he turned his gaze off into the water. “I dreamed of the day that I would kill them both and take their place.” He sighed through his nose and looked back at her.

She had tears in her eyes, her heart tearing apart for him. She had no idea his life had been filled with nothing but tragedy, death, and agony. Circumstances had not been in his favor. She hoped beyond hope that they would change for him now. But she wouldn’t change them for him... not without knowing he had changed as well, even a little.

“Padme,” he said heavily, ‘I’ve spent thirty-three years without knowing what it means to care for someone else. I didn’t know what love meant. I didn’t even know it really existed... until I saw you. I fell in love with you, Padme, as I never thought I could. You are *everything* to me. I never thought I would care about someone so much that if something happened to them, if they... if they died... I would want to die, too.’ He gazed down at her passionately, seriously. “You are my heart, Padme.” He brought her hand up to his chest and pressed it against his beating organ.

Through her tears, Padme smiled. “It’s nice to finally meet you... Anakin Skywalker.”

She reached up and kissed him.

Padme awoke with a muffled groan to the sound of someone calling her name. She felt a cool, inhuman hand running through her hair, and she shut her eyes, burying her face into the covers, and curled her fingers into the blanket.

“Padme, wake up,” the voice urged.

Padme sniffed and lifted up her head, blinking at an awake Anakin. He was much more alert; in fact, his face was grim. Ignoring the aching muscles in her shoulders, she sighed and said, “What’s wrong?” She rolled her shoulders back and slid back into her chair.

“A lot of things, I’m afraid.” With a small wince, he pushed himself upright and looked at her. “Padme, I know this is sudden, but you have two choices.”

Now, she was awake. “Anakin, what’s going on?”

“Jix just contacted me,” he said gravely. ‘They were attacked by Imperial guards at your apartment. Yes, Sabe and your sister are all right,’ he added at the look on her face. “They’ve already left the planet. I told them to go into hiding. They should be heading for Naboo as we speak to... ugh...” He leaned over and pulled off the covers, revealing a pair of black pants. “To drop off your sister.”

“Imperial guards? But... that means...”

He rose to his feet, towering over her. “Yes. The Emperor’s coming after you. After me, too. Which means we have a limited amount of time before he shows up on this ship. We’re already out of Coruscanti space, headed for a supposed Rebel base, but that won’t hold him for long. It’s under my orders, so my men won’t be held accountable for my actions.” He winced again and slowly walked over to the nearest console.

“Anakin, you shouldn’t be out of bed, you have to —”

“To what?” he interrupted, turning back to her. ‘To rest?’ Sighing, he limped back over to her and took her hands. “Padme, you don’t understand. As much as I want to kill the Emperor... I’m not strong enough right now. Even with the bacta tank, it’ll take me weeks to fully heal.” He shook his head, looked down. “And even when I’m back at my best strength... I’m not ready mentally. I’m not strong enough in the dark side anymore to take him on, and I sure as hell am not strong enough in the light side.” He snorted. “I can’t take him. Not like this. I need to know where I stand, and how to respond. And honestly...” He sighed again and rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know how long that will take.”

Padme took his face in her hands. “What prompted this sudden change?” she asked quietly. “I thought you were a Sith.”

He smiled faintly. “I think I still am. Kriff, I don’t even know anymore what I am. But who I am... that’s another story.” He pressed her hand to his cheek. ‘I won’t let the Emperor kill you, Padme.’ He pulled back and returned to the console. “We need to find a planet, somewhere where the Emperor won’t find us. We can stop by Naboo to say good-bye to your sister if you want, only because that’ll be the last place he’ll expect us to go, but we can only stay for two days at the most. Then, we’ll have to find another planet.”

Padme rubbed her eyes and rose to her feet, shuffling towards him. “What planets are you looking at?”

“Somewhere... somewhere far, out of the way. Somewhere where a Jedi would hide.”

“You’re not a Jedi,” she said with a small, confused smile.

“No, I’m not. I’m nothing right now. But...” He rubbed his chin, which bore a five o’clock shadow, “If I can find a Jedi... I might be able to train to defeat the Emperor. Not all of the Jedi were exterminated — even the Emperor couldn’t find them all. I used to think those who hid were cowards... But now, I know they were the smart ones. The ones with survival instinct and good training. I need that. That is... if they don’t try to kill me first.”

“You’re not going to try to find another Sith?”

“Only two Sith, Padme,” Anakin reminded her grimly. ‘And if I did find a prophet, they’d just want to kill me to take my place. It doesn’t work like that. No,’ he said, shaking his head, “I need to figure this out.” He turned to her. “But I need to know, Padme... Are you coming with me?”

“Of course I am,” she said instantly, feeling a boldness and odd sense of calm she had never felt before.

A hint of a smile reached his lips but quickly faded. He turned away with a dark frown, folding his arms over his chest.

“What is it?” she asked, touching his arm lightly and urging him to face her.

“I’m never going to be the man you want, Padme,” Anakin told her with a grave expression on his hardened face. “I may not be a Sith or work for the Emperor anymore, but I am no saintly Jedi. And I don’t think I ever will be. I’ve been in the dark for too long.”

Padme came up to him and smiled, putting her hands on his face. “I never wanted a saintly Jedi,” she reminded him softly. “I didn’t fall in love with a perfect man, and I don’t want one. I fell in love with you. And I still love you — *you*. Not a perfect Jedi. And who says Jedi are perfect, anyway?”

Anakin’s face still retained a somber expression, but he leaned forward, kissing her forehead warmly. “I love you.”

“And I love you.”

Naboo was probably one of the most beautiful planets Jix had ever been to, and he’d been to quite a few planets, ranging from Hoth to Rodia to Metellos to... well, pretty much everywhere. “Then again,” he added to Sabe, “Uncle Dee usually sends me to the crappiest places you can think of. I once had to spent an entire week in the slums of an outer-rim planet. I smelled like garbage for a kriffing month.”

Walking alongside him towards the rental speeder, Sabe smirked. “What was the planet?”

Jix thought for a minute. “Can’t remember, damn it.”

Sabe laughed, ignoring the dirty looks she was receiving from Sola. “If I were an incredibly stupid girlfriend bimbo, I’d probably tell you that I don’t care what you smell like, just as long as you’re with me.”

“Thank the Force you’re not,” Jix muttered.

Sabe shoved him playfully with her elbow, and he nudged her back. Sola sighed huffily and folded her arms over her chest.

“I think I’ll make it on my own now,” she snapped. “I’ll get Darred to pick me up.”

Sabe and Jix exchanged glances, then shrugged.

“Fine,” said Jix. ‘Do whatever you want. I don’t care. You can walk home if you want. Let’s go, Red.’ Without another word to Sola, he and Sabe walked away from her, leaving her glaring after them. The couple smirked at each other, knowing that Sola probably wanted to rip both their heads off, and strolled arm in arm towards the speeder rental platform. But as they reached their speeder, Sabe said, “Hang on a minute.”

Jix frowned in confusion, key in hand. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s just such a nice day. And you’ve never been here before. C’mon, it’s the middle of the city, and the marketplace will be open. Let’s take a walk. My flat’s not far from here, anyway, only a few blocks. The only reason we needed the speeder was to bring Miss Witch back to her place.”

“Your flat, huh?” Jix got a certain gleam in his eye, a gleam that left her shivering from anticipation.

“Yes, my flat. But don’t get any ideas, buddy.” She poked his chest and sauntered away. “Couch for you.”

“What happened to ‘future husband’?” Jix demanded as he slung Sabe’s pack over his shoulder. “If I’m lugging around your stuff, I should at least get some benefits.”

“Benefits, huh? You’re in the presence of royalty, more or less,” she said with a dazzling smile. “That’s benefit enough.”

Jix shook his head, muttering under his breath. “This is why I don’t have girlfrie—” But he was cut off when Sabe whirled around, leaned up on her tiptoes, and pressed a hot kiss to his mouth. He dropped the pack and snaked his arms around her thin, toned waist, but just as it was getting good, she pulled back, nipped his stubbled chin, and slipped out of his arms, continuing down the cobblestone street.

Jix stared at her as she strolled down the road, dazed. He’d never met a woman who made his head spin, but he certainly wasn’t complaining.

TBC...

This chapter was pretty much all fluff, but after the last chapter, I think you all deserve it. More fluffiness (not as much) and some more drama in the next chapter.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

Hmmm... at this point, I'm not sure I should keep saying that... we're almost finished, anyway! :p But ah, well, why break from tradition?

— **Serena**

22. Chained, Unchained

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you SO much, guys! :) I'm so thrilled you all liked the last chapter. It was definitely one of my favorite chapters to write. I was sniffing as I was writing that last scene.

Note: I'm extremely busy with college, so I hope you'll understand that I can't update as much as I used to.

Also, I forget if I've said this before, but despite this next chapter, don't worry about Anakin. He's not going to be the happy-go-lucky Anakin, although he might be slightly more relaxed around Padme. But he'll always be Vader. I think I should warn you now, he's never going to be a real Jedi. More like a dark Jedi, one who's not afraid to break rules and shift to the dark side every now and then. Whatever he is, he's not going to be a sweet (in the conventional sense) or kind guy.

The sequel, which should be up soon after I'm done with this, will not be a right-after extension of this story. What I mean is, it's not going to be centered around Anakin and Padme again, because this story is about them. We're going to be jumping ahead eighteen or so years, and it will focus on the long-lasting effects of Anakin's betrayal. So, basically, the next story will be about their children. I actually would like to make this a trilogy to get all the couples in, but we'll see.

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Chained, Unchained

"Just one question," Padme said as Anakin slipped on a black shirt. "How are we going to get out of here?"

Anakin threw her a small hint of a smile and said, "We'll be following your example."

"My example?" Padme frowned as she watched Anakin's jaw clench when he grabbed a jacket. "What's that?" Rising to her feet, she went over and helped him slip on the black military jacket, smoothing it over his shoulders. He didn't thank her, but he didn't rebuff her, either, as many men were wont to do under the pressure of doing things on their own when injured.

“This is a pilot’s uniform,” said Anakin. ‘We’re going to get you a stormtrooper’s outfit from the adjacent room. We always keep a few spares.’ He turned to her and brushed his knuckles against her cheek. “I don’t think anyone could mistake you for a man, not even in a uniform.”

She smiled faintly. “But how are we —” She halted when the door opened, and the Doctor and Admiral Piett strode into the room. The doctor nearly stopped short when he saw Anakin standing and immediately glared at Padme.

“You! Girl! I told you that he is not to be disturbed! How could you —”

Anakin’s hand reached out, an invisible grip on the doctor’s throat. Anakin’s eyes glittered, and his jaw flexed. As the doctor levitated off the ground, choking and turning purple, Anakin stepped forward and glared at him. “Talk to her like that again... and I break your neck,” he said darkly, in a low, harsh voice that reminded Padme so much of Vader.

Padme was tempted to tell Anakin to release the doctor, but upon glancing behind the doctor at Piett, she saw only a cold expression on the Admiral’s face. Apparently, Piett had seen this happen before many times and wasn’t phased by it. She didn’t think Anakin would kill the Doctor, but Piett didn’t seem too upset by situation. She didn’t care for the doctor, certainly, but on the other hand, she did not want to see him dead.

Anakin, however, released the doctor and let him drop to the floor, clawing at his throat and coughing violently. Anakin flexed his hands and stared down coldly at the Doctor.

“The only reason you are not dead is because you treated me in confidence,” Anakin told him sternly. “But this is the last time I will see you. You will be escorted to your quarters where Admiral Piett will deal with you.”

Piett nodded, muttered something into his com.

“Get out,” Anakin said icily to the Doctor. “Now.”

The Doctor shot one last sullen look to Padme and slinked out of the room. Once the door was shut behind him, Anakin turned to Piett.

“You’ve served me well these years,” Anakin told him. “But I’m afraid that time is at an end. The Emperor is sending his servants to destroy me, and as you can see, I’m not well enough to fight. I’m leaving the Empire permanently. You’re in charge of the *Executor*, Admiral.”

The Admiral looked as though he wanted to say something, so Anakin nodded. “Forgive me, sir,” Piett said, “But my duty is to you first.”

“Not to the Emperor?” Anakin demanded quietly.

Piett slowly shook his head. “No, sir. If I may be as bold to say, I am not the only one who feels as I do. Veers, Fel, and others would serve you over the Emperor. And with all due respect, sir, once the Emperor finds out you’re gone, none of us, especially those in command, will be shown mercy.”

Anakin frowned. “I can’t take the ship with me,” he said. “One, it’s too big, and two, it’s far too easy to track.”

“Be that as it may, if you’re leaving, then I and others will follow you.”

Padme had never seen Anakin look so shocked before. His lips parted, and his eyes widened fractionally. After a pause, he nodded.

“Very well. But we’ll have to leave on separate shuttles and spread out until I can figure out where we’ll be ending up. I’d suggest outer-rim planets, somewhere the Emperor will have to spread his resources to look for you.” He stepped closer, eyed his Admiral sternly. “There’s going to be prices on your head, you know that.”

Piett nodded shortly. “I do, sir. But frankly, milord, there isn’t much of a choice.”

“No, there isn’t,” agreed Anakin grimly. ‘But we don’t have much time.’ He took Padme’s hand, gently pulled her towards him. “We have to go. You’re in charge, for the present. Make the necessary arrangements. I’ll still use my private com but scramble it so we’ll be able to keep in touch.”

Piett nodded again. “Yes, sir.”

Anakin hesitated, then held out his real hand. “You’re a good man, Admiral. A man could always use someone of your caliber.”

A shocked expression crossed Piett’s face, but he slowly reached out and firmly shook Anakin’s hand. “Thank you, sir. Good luck.”

Anakin nodded and strode out of the room with Padme at his side. However, before they had reached the door, Anakin glanced back. “Not exactly what you expected, is it, Admiral?” he asked dryly. Padme realized he was referring to the face under the mask.

Piett paled, opened his mouth, and then gave Anakin a small smile. “No, sir.”

A thin smile came over Anakin’s face, and he stepped through the door with Padme by his side. They had entered a small, empty room with a few benches and lockers, like a men’s locker room. Anakin released Padme’s hand and opened one of the locker doors. Inside was a Stormtrooper’s uniform. He tossed the helmet to Padme and pulled out the other pieces of the uniform.

“I don’t think trooper 1183 will be using this for a while,” he said, handing her the rest of the uniform.

Padme stared at the helmet and slid it onto her head, patting the top of it. “I can hardly see in this thing,” she joked, feeling the need to lighten up the situation for his sake.

“Do you need help getting it on?” he asked, snatching a pilot’s helmet from a nearby locker.

Padme laughed. “Most men would want me to be taking something off, not putting it on.”

His eyes swept over her, causing her to shiver. “There’s time for that later,” he said, his voice low and deep, once again reminding her of Vader. “Now, let’s get this on you. The shuttle bay isn’t far.”

Padme gave him a mock salute and picked up the rest of uniform. Once Anakin had helped her to put it on, he motioned for her to follow him and slipped on his own helmet. They left

the changing room and stepped out into the corridor. Padme was tempted to take his hand, but she knew how that would look.

“Straighten your shoulders,” Anakin muttered. “Stay by me.”

She did as he asked, stiffening when they passed three senior officers. But even though they passed through several corridors, no one stopped them. Still, she didn’t breathe a sigh of relief until they reached the shuttle bay. Anakin had clearly already picked out a ship, for he strode purposefully up to a small shuttle.

“Hey, you!”

Anakin halted, turned sharply. Padme felt her heart beating in her chest as she stood beside him. A lieutenant came up to them, not looking pleased.

“Where are you going?” the lieutenant demanded.

“Orders from the Admiral,” Anakin told him. “We’re to take this shuttle out for testing. One of the power converters seems to be malfunctioning.”

The lieutenant scowled and folded his hands behind his back. “I wasn’t notified.” He glanced at Padme, and she wondered if he could hear her heartbeat. “And what are you doing?”

“He’s with me,” answered Anakin. “He was ordered to help me in case of emergency.”

The lieutenant didn’t look convinced. “I need to speak with the Admiral.”

“Look, ask him if you want, but we’re on a schedule,” Anakin snapped. Padme heard a note of Vader in his voice and hoped the lieutenant wouldn’t notice. Well, why would he? But before the lieutenant had a chance to reply, Anakin turned around and stormed up into the shuttle. Padme did a double take and hurried after him, ignoring the lieutenant’s splutterings. Once they were both safely inside, Anakin pulled off his helmet and started up the ship. Padme stumbled into the cockpit and grabbed the back of the co-pilot’s seat, only to fly forward when the ship jumped into space. She let out a small shriek and tumbled right into Anakin’s lap. He slammed his hand on the hyperdrive control and pressed the autopilot button, then stared down at Padme as she gazed up at him through the helmet, feeling incredibly foolish.

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly.

He just stared down at her, then gently reached up and pulled off her helmet. Curls spilled out, and he took one in his fingers and caressed it. Then, he reached up with his free hand, yanked off his helmet, and bent his head down to hers.

“I love you,” he muttered just before pressing heated lips to her own.

He only pulled back when the com started beeping. Letting out a sigh against her mouth, he kissed her one last time and helped her sit upright. As she sank into her own chair, dizzy and flustered, he answered the call. On the other line was Admiral Piett.

“My lord, Admiral Piett here.”

Anakin cleared his throat. “Report.”

“Sir, General Veers and I and several others are preparing to leave the *Executor* now. Your flight has been cleared.”

“Good work, Admiral. Report when you have landed at your destination.”

“Yes, sir.” The link disconnected, and Padme realized that these two weren’t the type to drag on long conversations. Well, Vader certainly wasn’t.

She let out a yawn and realized that she’d been hit by another wave of exhaustion, most likely brought on from emotional stress as well. She blushed and grinned sheepishly when Vader raised an eyebrow.

“Go get some rest, Padme. You’ve taken care of enough people. Time to take care of yourself.”

“But what if we get followed? What if you need a gunman? I can shoot.”

“We’re going to be in hyperspace for the next several hours,” said Vader. “You should sleep.”

Padme folded her arms over her chest. “You know I don’t like being bossed around. If I refuse, will you use a mind trick on me?” she challenged.

He snorted. “They only work on the *weak*-minded, Smuggler. You’re anything but weak. But you are tired. For your own sake, please, get some sleep.”

Padme yawned again and nodded. “Yeah, I think you’re right. But if you need anything, wake me up.”

“Deal.”

She smiled faintly, squeezed his shoulder, and slipped off to the small sleeping quarters. Within minutes, she was curled up under the covers and fast asleep, feeling more at peace than she had over the past several months.

“Kriff, it’s nice here,” remarked Jix. “Don’t know why I didn’t come here to relax before.”

Sabe, her hand in his arm, snorted. “One, because your Uncle Dee didn’t give you any relaxation time, and two, even if he did, you’d go to Corellia or Rodia or someplace with lots of bars, casinos, and women.”

Jix gave her a lopsided grin and shrugged. “First two, yeah. But not women so much.”

Sabe snorted. “Nice try, buddy. But please. They must’ve been all over you.”

Jix’s grin widened, and Sabe glared at him.

“Not *me*, you overblown idiot. I’m not all over you.”

Jix chuckled. “No, you’re not. Must be why I like you so much.” He glanced down at a passing stand and picked up an odd orange fruit. “Now what the hell is this?”

Sabe took it away from him, inspected it, and pointed it at him. “You know what this is? You really want to know?” She paused, then put the fruit back. “Too bad, ’cause I got no

idea.”

Jix snorted. “Some local you are.”

“Hey, I live in the palace. We only eat the best, most expensive food. Not to sound like a snob, but I wouldn’t touch half of this food.”

“You wouldn’t make it as me, then.”

She gave him an appraising look. “Sure I would. I’d just use my infamous Corellian charm and hold a gun to the guy’s head and tell him to get me the best food. Or you could find a female vendor who sells high-quality food and flirt with her, show off your major muscles.” She flexed her clothing-covered bicep and attempted a macho face.

Jix gave her a derisive look. “You can’t be a better me than me. That’s just wrong, sister.”

Sabe just laughed and swaggered down the cobblestone street.

“Sabe! Sabe!” Both turned to see a young man with red hair rushing towards them, a brilliant smile on his face. Although a little pudgy, he wasn’t bad looking.

Jix shot a confused, suspicious look to Sabe, who glanced down and shook her head.

“Aw, kriff,” she muttered under her breath.

Padme sighed, rolled over, and groaned, stretching. Blinking blearily, she stared at the unfamiliar dark gray ceiling overhead and frowned, for a moment forgetting where she was. She sat upright, looked around, then remembered as everything came flashing back to her. Speaking of which... where was Anakin? She pulled off the starchy, cold covers and padded out of the tiny sleeping quarters. Entering the cockpit, she found Anakin sitting in the Pilot’s chair, but his hands weren’t on the controls. He looked as though he were meditating. Hesitantly, she tried to step away, but he spoke.

“Good morning.”

She knew then that she would never be tired of his voice.

His chair swiveled slowly to face her, and his eyes opened, glittering deep blue in the dim light only provided by the passing of stars. The rest of him was covered in shadow. Before, she would have been afraid. Now, it simply made her exhilarated, and a strange warmth crept into her chest, a feeling that she had only been experiencing in his presence. But it grew stronger every time she saw him.

“Good morning,” she replied softly, pushing curls out of her face. “I’m sorry — I didn’t realize you were meditating.”

He held out a hand, and she stepped forward and took it. He pulled her into his arms, running a soothing, strong hand up and down her back. “It’s not easy,” he told her. “The dark side is there, strong. I think it’ll always be there. The Emperor is not a strong presence in my mind, but... There’s always this shadow lurking. I don’t think that will ever go away. I need a new teacher.”

“And where do you think we’ll find one?”

“Not sure yet. We’ll search the outer planets — Jedi have cleverly hidden themselves. And they’ve never seen Darth Vader without his mask, so they won’t count me as a threatening presence if I hide my darkness from them to begin with.”

Padme ran a hand through his hair, and he sighed.

“I’ve been looking through the list of planets that might be useful,” he continued. “I was thinking of Mandalore.”

“Mandalore?” She pulled back to look down at him. “But isn’t that full of bounty hunters?”

“Exactly. Which is why the Emperor would think the Jedi too scared to go there. It would be the perfect place to hide — I know I’d choose it.” He glanced up at her. “It’ll be dangerous, most likely. If this is too much for you, I need to know now.”

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m coming with you. I told you I would. I love you, Anakin. I need you as much as you need me.”

A faint smile crossed his lips. “I do need you. I need you more than anything or anyone in this entire universe. You are the only person who’s ever meant anything to me.” A wry smile crossed his face. “I never imagined I, Lord Darth Vader, would be saying this in a million years.”

“Love changes many things,” Padme said, and leaned down and kissed him.

He pulled back, looked at her. “That sounded incredibly... cheesy.” He spat out the word as though it were a piece of bad meat.

She just grinned. However, she looked up when the indicator sounded. Anakin leaned forward, touched several buttons, and said, “We’re coming up on Naboo now. Take a seat. We’ll be there in just a second.”

He pulled the ship out of lightspeed, and the lush planet of Naboo popped up before them, drawing slowly closer as they approached the upper atmosphere. Padme, upon seeing her beloved home planet, couldn’t help but feel a sharp pang in her chest. Her parents were here. Her entire family was here. Everything she had ever loved was here. She’d been away so long, she’d forgotten what this felt like.

Then, she looked at Anakin, who she knew was struggling not to watch her reaction. She placed her hand over his. Nothing else needed to be said.

Jix had a bad feeling about this as he watched the young man come up to them, a beaming smile on his face... all directed at Sabe. When he saw Jix, his smile faltered, and his gaze flickered from Sabe to him then back again. Sabe wouldn’t look at Jix, which didn’t help to ease Jix’s edgy nerves.

“Sabe,” said Naolan. “Where have you been? I’ve missed you!” He moved forward to hug her, which she returned awkwardly. Gently pushing him back, she forced a smile.

“Naolan... I thought you were on the other side of the planet, visiting friends.”

“I was, but I missed you too much.” He leaned forward to kiss her, but she turned her cheek, so his lips hit her upper cheekbone instead of her lips. Naolan pulled back, looking now suspiciously at Jix. “And you are?”

“No one,” Jix said coolly. “Just passing through. Stopped for directions.” He ignored Sabe’s startled and hurt stare.

“Ah, I see. Well, she certainly knows her way around,” Naolan said with a small smile, glancing at Sabe.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Jix muttered. Sabe’s eyes darkened.

Naolan reached out and took Sabe’s hand, pulling her towards him. He held out his free hand to Jix. “Naolan Nuba.”

Jix eyed his hand, wishing he could spit on it, but he shook it, enjoying the way Naolan winced at his strong grip. “Pleasure. Now I gotta go. Stuff to do, places to be, people to see...” He shot Sabe a glare. “You know how it is.”

Sabe’s lips parted, and she tried to step towards him, but he just moved away.

“So,” he said, “I take it you two are together?”

“Yep,” said Naolan cheerfully. “Three months now, right honey?”

Sabe wouldn’t look at Naolan now, either. “About that...” she said slowly.

Jix had had it. “That so?” he said edgily. “How sweet. Hope you two have a nice life.” Fuming, he turned away and started down the opposite street, wanting desperately to shoot or hit something, preferably Naolan. Wussy kriffing sithspawn.

“No! Jix! Damn it!” Sabe shouted after him. ‘Just... hold up!’ She muttered a few words to Naolan, patted him on the shoulder, and took off after Jix. “Jix! Wait just a damn minute!” She grabbed his arm and yanked him around to face her. “Will you just let me explain?”

“No need,” growled Jix. “I’ve seen enough.”

“No, you haven’t!” she snapped. “You don’t know everything! If you’d just wait a kriffing minute and let me explain, then—”

“Then what? We’ll go off into the sunset, live happily ever after?” he snorted disdainfully. “Get real, sister. I sure have. I shoulda followed my gut when I first met you, but I didn’t. Sure as hell won’t ever make that mistake again. Thought you were different, but you aren’t.”

“That’s not fair,” she retorted icily, stiffening. “I’m not a slut.”

“No,” snarled Jix, “What you are is a two-timing broad who ain’t any better than the other women I’ve dated. A cheatin’, lyin’ woman is what you are.”

Sabe lashed out, punched him in the face. He turned and spat blood on the ground, then laughed harshly, adding, “Yeah, and that’s what usually happens after something like this. Get mad at me all ya want, Your Majesty,” he said scornfully, “But that doesn’t change the fact of what you are.”

“You don’t know what the hell I am, you son of a Sith,” Sabe hissed. He had to be just a little impressed that she wasn’t nursing her hand yet. ‘You think I’ve this cushy life, that it’s been so easy for me. Let’s get something straight, Jix. Every day could be my last day. Every hour, every moment I have people wanting, waiting, plotting to kill me for any number of reasons. I lie awake at night in the Queen’s quarters, just hoping that the outer security will be enough to stop an intruder, and if not, that I’ll wake up quickly enough to stop him. Do you know how long a Queen’s decoy is expected to last?’ When he didn’t answer, she did. “Thirty years,” she spat out. “And that’s the longest. Maybe I’ll live ’till I’m thirty. But that’s basically it. If I live until I’m thirty, I’ve had a long life as a decoy.”

Jix, stunned, honestly didn’t know what to say.

“Before I was her main decoy,” Sabe continued, “There were five others. All killed within the first two years of their service. How do you think that makes me feel? At least you can hide. You’re not out in the open. Your job may be dangerous, but you’re not just sitting around waiting for someone to kill you.”

Jix quickly felt his temper dissipating, replaced with unwanted shame and remorse, emotions he rarely felt these days.

“So, as you can imagine, when you find someone who might like you, who might be good as a companion, you take advantage,” she said, drawing in a slow, labored breath. ‘And that’s what I found with Naolan. He was nice, kind, and gentle. He was safe. He wasn’t like my job. I didn’t feel as though I were pretending to be someone else. At least, that’s what I thought.’ She looked up at him, hard. “And then I met you. The most arrogant, insensitive, irritating bastard to have ever come along in my life. I dished it out, but you could take it. I realized that with you... with you I didn’t have to be anyone else but myself. Not even a fine lady, which is what I had to be around Naolan. I could curse, I could argue, I could get on your nerves, and you would still make me feel like I was the only person in the world.”

To Jix’s astonishment, he though he saw tears glittering in her eyes.

“So don’t you dare judge me,” she rasped. “Don’t you dare talk to me like that. I had no idea what I would get into when I went to visit Padme. I had no idea that I would meet you, that I would like you, much less...” She trailed off. “Much less... love you.”

Jix’s lips parted, and he found himself breathing more heavily.

“Naolan was nice,” she continued. ‘But that was it. He’s the exact opposite of you. He’s dull, he’s boring, and he doesn’t know me, even after several months of seeing each other. But you... you got under my skin and into my head within several days. You’re not afraid of me like he would be if I really acted myself like I do around you. And just for the damn record, I’ve never told this to any man before.’ She took in several breaths, and he still found himself unable to say anything. “So if you don’t like it, or if you think what I’ve said is stupid and cheesy, then *kriff* you.” And, turning sharply on her heel, she stormed off down the street.

He didn’t follow her.

TBC...

So, we have some drama, some fluff, and some angst. Good stuff.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

23. Mine Forever

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By **Serena**

A/N: Thank you SO much, guys! :) Wow. This chapter is way, way, way overdue. That's what college will do to ya. Very sad. Still looking for an agent, but my last rejection was actually very encouraging, so I'm still hoping.

Actually, I am also planning on publishing my novel through Barnes and Noble's Pubit! — an E-book site. I'm in the process of working on the book cover, so once that's done, I will be putting it up through Pubit, God willing, and you should be able to buy it through that if you're interested. More details and information to come soon. :)

Note: *This is the SECOND TO LAST CHAPTER. Just so ya know. :)*

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Mine Forever

Padme honestly wanted to cry when they landed in Varykino. The familiar landscape, the mountains, the water, and the lush foliage sent deep pangs through her chest. But as she stepped outside with Anakin to her private residence, and the warm breeze blew around her, she felt suddenly unable to shed any tears. Her pain was duller, and her eyes were dry. She felt Anakin's prosthetic hand on her shoulder, and she looked up at him and nodded. Together, they made their way up to the house.

"We should be safe here for a while, I think," Padme said, opening the door. The house was empty of all people, but it looked as though it had been well taken care of in her absence. Anakin moved past her, checking all of the rooms, and she took off her cloak and tossed it on the back of the couch. "The housekeeper and groundskeeper come by every three weeks."

"They're going to know you're here, then." Anakin came out from another room and pulled off his cloak, depositing it next to hers. "We can only stay for a few days, at the most. Do you know when they'll be back?"

"The last cleaning was less than a week ago, so we've got a bit of time," she told him. "But I just want to find Sabe and Jix and move on."

"Agreed."

The sunset cast warm gold and coral hues through the large bay windows of the sunroom into the living room, making Anakin's face a mix of dark shadows and warm tones. His eyes glittered in the golden light as his gaze swept over the elegant mansion critically, and somewhat approvingly.

"Nice house. I didn't realize senators made this much."

"You're one to talk. You could have a thousand of these and you'd still be swimming in money," she teased, moving past him into the kitchen. "You want something to eat? The pantry's usually well-stocked. And the refrigerated food keeps for a few weeks, so it should still be good. What are you in the mood for?" She felt like a housewife all of a sudden and blushed, but she hid her blush from him.

"Anything at this point," he said, following her into the kitchen. "I don't usually eat a lot, but there was nothing better on the shuttle than rations."

"Use to high-end food, are we, Mr. Snob?" she joked, opening the pantry doors.

"No. Just edible food," he said dryly. "So, what do we have in here?"

"Honestly," Padme sighed, "I don't feel much like cooking."

"Neither do I." Anakin brushed past Padme and came up to the packaged foods. "Cereal... cookies... dried meats... crackers..." One by one, he took things off shelves. "Feel like being a little spontaneous?"

"Anakin, ever since I met you, my middle name has been spontaneous."

"Good to know." He took a box of nuts off the shelf. "Let's eat."

They ate in the large kitchen that still glowed from the early evening sunset. Both sitting on the counter side by side, they ate whatever stored foods they could find. After, Anakin wiped his hands and jumped down to the ground, then held his arms up for Padme. Smiling, she let him catch her and slowly bring her back down to the ground. He bent down to kiss her, but just as their lips were about to touch, Anakin's com beeped. Hissing under his breath, Anakin pulled back and answered.

"What?" he snapped.

"It's me," said Jix's voice, not sounding any happier than his boss. "You here yet?"

"I told you I'd make contact," Anakin returned. "But yes, we're here. What's your position?"

"I'm... walking to a hotel."

"No," said Anakin, "You're in a bar. Where's your companion?"

"She found someone better worth her while," Jix growled. "I don't know where the hell she went. Not my problem anymore. She's a damn piece of work, and she can take care of herself."

Padme's eyes widened. "Who is she with?"

“Some idiot with a pudgy face that needs to be punched.”

“Naolan, right?” Padme sighed and rubbed her forehead. “I forgot she was seeing someone.”

“You too, huh?” Jix’s voice carried an acidic tone.

“Watch it,” Anakin warned.

“Forget it. I’ll meet up with you later. I’ll be at the Nubian Inn.” Jix shut off the connection abruptly.

“No, wait, Jix!” Padme started to say. “It wasn’t... serious...”

“Jix, I think,” Anakin said stiffly, “is throwing a temper-tantrum.”

“He’s just upset,” Padme told him softly. “He thought Sabe betrayed him. How would you feel if you knew I’d been seeing someone else before I met you, and, when we met again, he was still under the impression that we were together?”

“Simple,” said Anakin darkly, “I’d chop his head off.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Padme scolded, shoving him gently.

“You’re right, I wouldn’t. I’d choke him first, then wake him up, then cut his head off.”

“So, if I decided that I fell in love with someone else,” Padme said, putting her hands on her hips, “then you would kill him, knowing that I loved him.”

Anakin’s expression twisted into a torn, conflicted face. “I... I don’t know.” His tense posture deflated. ‘If you really loved him... I don’t think I would. But it would kill me,’ he admitted. “I would hate myself. And him.”

Padme smiled. “Good answer,” she said, squeezing his shoulder. “There’s still the Vader I fell in love with, but Starkiller is starting to go away.”

Anakin rubbed his forehead. “I don’t know if that will ever fully happen,” he muttered. “I can’t shake this darkness, Padme. I don’t know if I can do it.”

“We’ll do it together. I’ll help you. Every time you feel that darkness rising in you... I’ll... tell you I love you. Or, better yet.” She sat down in his lap. “I’ll kiss you. How’s that sound?”

Anakin grinned smugly. “That might defeat the purpose,” he told her. “If that’s the reward I get, I might start being Starkiller more often.”

“Fine,” she said, shrugging, “then I’ll just slap you.”

“I take it back.”

“That insufferable, idiotic, good-for-nothing... oaf!” Sabe fumed as she stormed down the street with a bewildered Naolan trailing behind her. “Why did I EVER get involved with that buffoon?”

“Uh, Sabe?”

“The most IRRITATING, bullying, whiny, stupid, lazy-arse in the SYSTEM!”

“Sweetie-pie?”

“NO, THE GALAXY!”

“Honey-buns?”

“NO, THE UNIVERSE!”

“Sugar-puff?”

Sabe rounded on him furiously. “WHAT?” she roared.

Naolan swallowed. “Darling,” he said carefully, reaching out to touch her shoulder, “I think we need to get you to the palace. I don’t think you’re feeling well. And we should... get as far away as possible from... that... man.” He tried to put his arm around her shoulder, but she angrily shrugged it off and stepped away, shaking her head.

“No. I can’t go back.” Suddenly, she deflated and sighed, rubbing her forehead. The mess they were in. Honestly, now that she thought about it, having a row with Jix hadn’t been exactly the brightest idea, given the current situation. And Padme and Vader would be arriving soon, and she knew that the Dark Lord wouldn’t be too pleased that she and Jix weren’t still together anymore, much less getting along. Not good. She needed to rectify the situation soon, before people started recognizing her and asking questions. People like Naolan. But then again, she’d been the one to storm away from Jix... But it had been Jix’s fault in the first place. Or... maybe not. Sabe rubbed her temples. ‘Naolan,’ she said, looking up at him. “I’m sorry. I haven’t been fair to you.”

Naolan frowned, moved in closer. “What are you talking about? Are you feeling well?”

“I’m fine.” She stepped away. ‘I just... I’m sorry. I have to go. We have to end this. Whatever we had.’ Turning, she started to walk away, but Naolan grabbed her arm. In a speedy, instinctive move, Sabe lashed out with her elbow, knocking him hard in the nose. He let out a cry of pain and stumbled back away from her, clutching his nose. Eyes widening, Sabe hastily drew forward and gasped, “Oh, I’m so sorry!”

“You,” Naolan choked, “you broke my nose!”

“It was instinct... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...” Sabe helplessly stood there. After an awkward moment, she pulled out a handkerchief and gave it to him. “Um. Here. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Backing away, she whirled around and hurried away before she drew even more attention to herself.

But where would she go? Vader would kill her. She and Jix were supposed to stay together, only wait there for a short time until Padme and Vader arrived, where they would meet up and go to Mandalore from there. Well, at least, that was what Padme had said she herself was going to do. As for Sabe herself... she had no obligations. Padme was as safe as she could be. Sabe had helped with that. Now, she was free to go or do anything she wanted. Few people knew that she was an actual decoy, so, potentially, she could still stay here on Naboo and keep her job. It wasn’t as if the danger would lessen any, but she could take care of herself.

However... Jix had complicated things. She hadn’t expected to like him... and most certainly not fall in love with the kriffing sithspawn. Arrogant sod. She honestly didn’t know

why she liked him. It definitely wasn't his dashing good looks or roguish charm. Or the way he shot perfectly with a blaster pistol or took a man out in under two seconds.

Sabe strode through the city streets and into the marketplace, rubbing her forehead and glowering. She needed to figure this out. She needed to know what to do next. Slowing her pace, she strolled glumly through the market, stopping to absentmindedly stare at the various food and clothing for sale. She stopped in front of a cloak shop to admire a deep red velvet cloak.

"Padme?"

Sabe whirled around to face several people coming towards her. Oh, kriff.

"Senator Mothma, Senator Organa." She nodded stiffly, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else."

Senator Organa eyed her shrewdly with a look she didn't like at all. "The resemblance is extraordinary. But have we met before?" His gaze raked over her body.

Sabe glared at him. "No. And by the way, my chest is fine. As is the rest of me. Up here, please." She motioned to her face, causing Mon Mothma to turn scarlet and look away, seemingly embarrassed.

Organa just smirked. "You seem very much familiar. Are you at all acquainted with Senator Padme Amidala?"

"No, I'm not. If you'll excuse me." She brushed past him, but he caught her arm and tugged her close.

"I know you're hiding something," he breathed into her ear. "Tell me where Padme is, and I can arrange a deal for you."

Sabe smiled sweetly. "Kriff you." She slammed her foot onto his and yanked her arm away, striding away into the crowds. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw him curse and groan, leaning over. His entourage moved to help him, but he just pushed them away and turned to see if he could find her. Ducking down, she broke into a run and slipped through the people.

Great. Things just kept getting bleeding better here.

Then, of course, her comlink buzzed. "Verina," she answered shortly.

"Where are you?" Vader demanded coldly. "And what the hell is going on with you and Jixton? If you've compromised us in any way —"

"Oh, save it for someone who actually gives a damn," Sabe snapped, slipping into a dark side alley. "Look, I know you're worried about your own arse, but I'm trying to save mine right now, so unless you've got something useful to say, shut it."

A pause, then, "You'd better watch your tone, Verina." There was murmuring in the background that could only be Padme whispering to him.

"Kiss my arse, Vader. You may have been the Mighty Dark Lord of the Universe, but right now you're the Supreme Commander of Absolutely Nothing. So don't give me that crap. Let

me talk to Padme.”

Another pause, then Padme came on the line. “Sabe? Are you all right? Where are you? What’s going on?”

“Just had a run in with your buddy-buds Bail Organa and Mon Mothma and their posse. I had to split. He thought I was you at first, and when he saw that I wasn’t, he suspected something. He’s a smart man, Padme. I think he knows I was impersonating you. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Padme sighed. “OK. It’s all right. Where are you?”

“I’m on Fourth and Zavian, heading away from the palace. Did you want to meet?”

“Is anyone with you?”

“No,” Sabe asked, wondering why she would ask such an odd question. “I’m not with Jix, if that’s what you mean. Arrogant prick can go to Hoth for all I care.”

“Sabe... Jix is at the Nubian Inn. Listen, I know you two are having issues right now, but if Bail Organa’s here, then we have to leave now. Are you coming to Mandalore with us? It’s not safe for you here.”

“Padme, it’s not safe for me anywhere anymore,” Sabe sighed. “It’s never been. Now I’m on the run, and so are you.”

“So come with us. Start a new life on Mandalore.”

Sabe paused. “I don’t know, Padme. I need to figure things out. You can go, by all means. But I’m not sure.”

“Sabe.” Padme’s voice was firm. “Do you love Jix?”

Sabe didn’t answer for a few minutes. Walking down a small residential street, she suddenly looked up and realized that the Nubian Inn was only a few blocks away. “Yes,” she answered finally in a grudging voice. “I do. He thought I was still with Naolan. I got pissed and took off when he wouldn’t listen to me.”

“Then it’s up to you, Sabe. But we can’t stay here much longer. It’s only a matter of time ___”

“Before someone knows you’re here, I know.” Sabe sighed again. “I’ll head towards Jix. If I don’t see you here, I’ll find you on Mandalore. Sabe out.” She put her com away and glanced left and right before heading down a smaller side street, internally running over scenarios in her head. What if she found Jix and he decided that he wouldn’t want to be with her anymore? What would she do? Where would she go? She’d never really thought about this before. Everything she had was here. Her job, her life, her money, her home. Now, with just one visit to an old friend, everything had completely come undone. Strangely enough, it both terrified and exhilarated her.

She didn’t need Jix. She didn’t need anyone. She could handle herself, kriff it, without a man. She’d been doing it for years now. It wasn’t like Jix’s arrival changed anything.

And, at the same time, it did.

Sabe turned down another lane towards the seedier section of the capital. But as she neared the Nubian Inn and Bar, hell broke loose.

TBC...

OK, so we have one more action-packed chapter to go... with a few surprise guests in the final chapter. I think I'll do an epilogue because I normally do. :)

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

24. This Is Alive

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By Serena

A/N: Everyone, I'd like to thank you for all of your support and reviews. :) This has been so much fun to write, and such a pleasure to read your comments. :)

IMPORTANT: *My novel OCEAN OF EMPTINESS is now available on Amazon in eBook format for Kindle, Mac computers, (with Kindle App) iPhone, iPad, Blackberry, and Android (with Kindle App). If interested, please see the link on my profile!*

ALSO IMPORTANT: *I am open for art commissions, and if you would like to commission me, or if you would like information, message me and/or check out my Deviantart profile by clicking on the link on my profile page here.*

I have a Facebook page, a Tumblr page, and a Twitter under Serena Kay/Serena Kenobi, so if you would like to follow me on any or all of those websites, please feel free to do so.

Note: *This is the LAST CHAPTER. Just so ya know. :) There WILL be an epilogue! :) I would like to do a sequel, and I've written the first chapter already, so we'll see how it goes.*

ALSO: *I do have the first chapter for the potential sequel to this written, and I have the whole story planned out. If you're interested in reading more from this alternate universe, please let me know. :)*

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Chapter Twenty-Four: This Is Alive

If there was one thing Jix absolutely loved, it was a good, hard, rough fight. Lots of fists flying, guns blazing, the sweet, gritty sounds of bones snapping, and most importantly, that pure, screaming rush of adrenaline. That rush reminded him that he was not a robot, that he wasn't some mindless machine just plodding through life with no emotion, no feeling.

When he found that rush, he was alive.

While bar brawls were common for him, he knew that these men attacking him were no ordinary thugs. They were well trained, well-armored, and clearly well-funded. There were about ten of them, all different shapes and sizes, but they all knew what they were doing. The thought of that gave Jix another rush — he might not survive this. He'd always been

overconfident, but it'd worked out for him so far. He hadn't really cared if he'd died. It wouldn't be pleasant, but hey, he'd had some laughs, some drinks, and some cash. One or two women, but that didn't matter as much to him. Until now. Until her.

It always started with some idiot making some stupid remark that just asked for a punch in the gut. Then, one thing would lead to another, and now he was up against the whole bar, fighting tooth and nail just for the hell of it. In the dim light and smoke of the bar, he ducked a punch and dealt an upper-cut to a thin alien who sank against the bar counter. The bartender was yelling and shaking his fist at Jix, but the Corellian just grinned and whirled around to kick another man in the groin. However, he was unable to miss a blow to the face, and turned, spitting out blood through his teeth and relishing in its tangy, bitter flavor.

But just when he had grabbed another man in a vicious chokehold, the door to the bar burst open with a loud crack, followed by the sound of several blaster shots firing. Then came the voice that had made Jix's head spin from the first time he had heard it.

"All right," roared a woman's voice, "What the hell is going on here, and where the *hell* is my Corellian?"

Jix grinned. Taking the opportunity, he threw the man to the ground and started for her. However, he was jerked back by someone else and was temporarily halted from reaching her. Whirling sharply, he grabbed a glass from off the counter and smashed it over the man's head. But, distracted, he found himself in a chokehold from a Wookiee-like, giant alien who gurgled unpleasantly and smelled of sewers and poison-fish. Jix struggled, but the alien lifted him up, shaking him and gurgling incoherently. Jix tried to reach for his blaster —

"GIVE ME MY MAN!" Sabe shrieked, and whacked the large alien across the back of the head with broken table leg. The alien grunted, released Jix, and dropped to the floor with a moan. Jix turned, coughing and rubbing his throat, and rose to his feet, gazing hard at Sabe. She was panting, glorious red hair askew, gripping the table leg so tightly her knuckles had turned white, and staring at him with dark, glittering eyes.

He'd never seen anything so utterly beautiful before. There was a short silence, and just before the bar returned to its chaotic fight, she threw him a dazzling, dark smile that made him actually — Force forbid — weak in the knees.

Kriff it, he thought, *She's the one*. And he started for her. She met him halfway and grinned up devilishly at him.

"We gotta go, tough guy," she said. "We have company from the capitol. Save your bar brawls for Mandalore."

"You coming with me?" he dared to ask.

She raised an eyebrow and held up her table leg. Then, she turned quickly and slammed it against another man who had been running up to them. Then, she faced him, hand on one hip. "That answer your question?"

"Let's paint the town red," Jix breathed.

Sabe grinned. "I love when you talk dirty."

Jix grabbed her, leaned down, and kissed her hard. Oh, yes. This was it. This was the rush. This was alive. And he never wanted to go back.

“Good thing I didn’t unpack,” Padme said as she grabbed her cloak and glanced around the room to make sure no trace existed. Satisfied, she nodded and turned to Anakin, and nearly stepped back, startled at the look on his face. “What’s the matter?”

“We can’t let him go, Padme,” Anakin said in a low voice. “If Bail is alive, he’s just one more enemy that we do not need right now.”

Padme halted, looked at him hard. “He doesn’t know we’re here, Anakin. We leave now, never look back.”

He stiffened, reached for the lightsaber at his belt. “I am not in the habit of running from an enemy, especially not one as pathetic as Organa.”

“Anakin, if you kill him now, it’s only a matter of time before the Emperor discovers we’re here. It’s already risky as it is. Do you really want to bring attention to us now, as we’re about to leave?”

“I don’t care,” he growled, throwing his cloak on. ‘I’m tired of people like him thinking that he can take on someone like me.’ He started for the door, hissing, “I’m going to finish this.”

Alarmed, Padme dashed after him. “Anakin, no!” she urged, placing a hand on his arm, jerking him back to her.

Anakin halted. But that murderous, red-tinted look in his eyes didn’t disappear.

“Don’t kill him,” Padme said softly. “He’s not worth it. Don’t spend your soul on him. There will be another time, but it’s not now. Even you must feel that. Please. We need to leave. Please, let’s just leave everything behind while we still can.”

Anakin gazed at her, then looked away, shoulders relaxing just a touch. He sighed heavily, turned away from her completely, and bent his head down. “Padme, you don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t know what this will be like. Trust me, I’ve had to deal with this before.”

Padme didn’t understand what he meant, but she let him continue.

“This will never stop, you realize that?” he demanded, his voice and expression growing in intensity. He started towards her. “Do you realize that even if all of our enemies are dead, more will come? No one will stop coming for me. For you. Every minute we’ll be in danger — you most of all — because of me. I can’t let you take that risk for me, Padme. I won’t allow it. This has gone on far enough.”

Padme looked up at him steadily. “No,” she said, perfectly calm. “It hasn’t.”

His jaw clenched. Moving forward swiftly, he grabbed her shoulders in a tight, iron-like grip, and shook her slightly. “You damn, foolish girl!” he snarled. ‘Don’t you realize who I am? What kind of danger I’m putting you in?’ His face contorting painfully, he released her

and turned away, hands clenching. He let out a half-sigh, half growl, and ran his hands through his hair. “Padme,” he said, in the roughest, most pained voice she had ever heard him use, “Why are you doing this to me?”

Padme, completely taken aback at his agonized tone, had no idea what to say. After a long, frustrated pause, she swallowed and opened her mouth to speak, but he sighed again and faced her, a heavy look on his face.

“I love you,” she blurted out suddenly.

His expression softened. “I love you.” As she came into his embrace, he pulled her to him in one of the most gentle holds she had received from him. She let her eyes close and felt his heart beat steadily, his warmth surrounding her, lulling her into a protected peace she had not experienced in years. They remained like that for several minutes, both comfortably silent. However, they could not stay like that for too long, and Anakin bent down, pressed his lips into her hair.

“Padme,” said he solemnly, drawing slightly back as to look into her eyes, “When we reach Mandalore, there is something that must be settled.”

Padme gave him a quizzical look. “What’s that?”

He released his hold on her waist and took her small hands in his own. “Be my wife,” he said softly.

Padme didn’t even hesitate. “Yes,” she said.

The departure from Naboo was quiet for the newly engaged couple. However, it was not an uncomfortable silence, but rather a somber one, almost reminiscent. Both knew that with this final act, they were leaving their entire pasts behind them. Nothing familiar. Nothing comforting but each other. Every shred of their past lives would be destroyed once they stepped foot on Mandalore, and both knew it would be finalized with their marriage.

A Sith Lord did not love. A senator did not leave her seat. But he was not a Sith, and she was not a senator any longer. Their slates had been wiped clean, and both felt a peace in that, as well as some trepidation. However, while their pasts had been left behind, Padme knew Anakin was still struggling with the darkness inside him, and she knew that it would probably never fully leave him. She also knew that she would never fully leave the senator behind her. There would still be people in need, people who needed defending, and that she would want to defend.

Up until that moment when the stars became a blur, and they disappeared into hyperspace, did it finally hit her that nothing in her life would ever be the same. It would be difficult, if impossible, to return to Naboo now that Bail would most likely have spies there. She would most likely never see any of her former friends again. She would likely never see Coruscant again, or any of her colleagues. Nothing would be recognizable, and that thought both frightened and exhilarated her.

She hadn’t realized she was lost in thought until the communicator beeped. Anakin, seemingly also brought out from his thoughts, stirred from his position in the pilot’s seat and

touched it.

“Report,” he said shortly.

“Jix here. We’ve just left Naboo and are on route to Mandalore. Where are we headed?”

“Sundari.”

“A major city? Ain’t that a little risky?”

“It’s diverse and corrupt. Full of criminals and people of your calibur, Jixton. You should fit right in.”

“Ha kriffing ha. What about you?”

“You are really questioning whether am I capable of protecting myself and the Senator?” Anakin’s voice carried a dangerous and somewhat amused edge.

Jix cleared his throat, realizing he’d almost just crossed a line. “No, not at all.”

“Well, maybe I am,” Sabe’s voice jumped in, sounding annoyed. “What’s your plan, huh?”

“My plan,” said Anakin, “is to get the necessary supplies from the city and find a temporary residence until I can find something more out of the way. But all the resources I require are in Sundari, which is we’re stopping there first. Clear enough for you?”

“It works,” replied the former handmaiden grudgingly. “Padme, you all right?”

“Fine,” Padme said distantly. She rubbed the back of her neck. “I just need some sleep.”

“Well, then get some,” Sabe ordered her. “You deserve it.”

“I think I will.” Padme glanced up as Anakin reached over and took her hand in his, caressing it lightly with his gloved hand. She smiled faintly and squeezed it. Honestly, she didn’t know how to tell Sabe she was engaged; but it had to come out sometime. Sighing, she opened her mouth, ready to tell her best friend the news, when Sabe jumped in first.

“Oh, yeah. Jix and I are getting hitched,” Sabe said brusquely. “Just thought you should know.”

Anakin and Padme exchanged amused, and unsurprised glances.

“About time,” said Padme, smiling. “Then I guess now would be a good time to tell you that I’m getting married, too.”

Mandalore was not exactly what Padme had expected, but it would do. The city of Sundari was dome-shaped, rested in the middle of the desert, and was completely crowded with all different kinds of people from everywhere. However, overall, there was a shadow of Mandalorian troops, finely dressed in traditional uniform, always around, patrolling. They made Padme nervous initially, but Anakin quickly assured her that they would have no idea who she was.

“We’re only staying here for a few days or so,” he added as they walked the sunlight streets together, both cloaked and disguised as refugees. “Once we’re finished, we’ll move on

the outskirts. There's a small town near one of their large oceans that will suit us fine."

Padme glanced up at him. "Will you be all right with that, though?" She halted, licked her lips. "I mean... what if you get bored?" she blurted out. "What if you decide that you don't want to —" Anakin cut her off with a kiss and pulled back after lingering for a moment.

"This is the start of our new life, Angel," Anakin told her somberly. "It's not going to be easy. Honestly, it might be hell most of the time. But I will never get bored, and I will never leave you."

Padme just took his hand and looked up at him. "Are you sure? Are you really sure this is what you want? That I'm what you want?"

"Angel, I haven't been sure of many things once you came into my life, but one thing I am sure of is how I feel about you." Anakin reached up and slipped a hand to where her jaw met her neck. "You are the only certainty in my life, Padme. Wherever you are, I am. You are the only reason I have to live."

"Don't say that," she whispered, placing her hand over his.

He just kissed her again.

The ceremony was simple, small, quiet. Padme knew she had always wanted a small wedding, unlike her sister and friends and the rest of her family. They had wanted the grandest, largest ceremony money could buy, and she knew that they had wanted the press there to make sure every moment was captured and documented. Her family had loved the limelight, especially Sola. But this softly lit, simple wedding had been nearly everything Padme had not imagined, but hoped for. Just the holy man, Anakin, and her in the fading light of Sundari.

They paid for two nights at a local hotel and entered their room. It was dark as Padme stepped in, but she moved forward and turned on the first lamp she saw. Discarding her cloak, she set it on the back of the chair and brushed a stray curl out of her face. Deep in thought, she didn't notice Anakin had been silent until she turned around to ask him if he were hungry.

However, when she saw him standing there in the doorway, silent, she froze.

Anakin's eyes were dark and hot, blazing with a fire she'd never seen before. His whole body was tense, as if ready to make a sudden move. Slowly, he reached up and shed his cloak.

Padme sucked in a breath as he shut the door, his eyes never leaving her, and made his way over to her in two swift strides. He swept down, kissing her longingly, deeply, forcefully. No gentleness, no holding back. His hands gripped her hips almost painfully, then made their way into her hair, on her neck, her cheek, her arms... She felt his hands on the clasps of her dress...

Padme felt as though she were drowning in his essence.

Yes, she thought before she lost all train of thought. *This is alive.*

THE END

OK, epilogue coming up! It's going to be really short, but a surprise as well. And I know you guys probably wanted Bail dead, but he's a major player in events to come, so as much as I would like to get rid of him, I really can't.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**

25. Epilogue

Brown Eyes (Wishes of Fire)

By Serena

A/N: Everyone, I'd like to thank you for all of your support and reviews. :) This has been an amazing experience, and I hope you stick around for the sequel. :)

IMPORTANT!: My YA, sci-fi/fantasy novel *OCEAN OF EMPTINESS* is now available on Amazon in eBook format for Kindle, Mac computers, (with free Kindle App) iPhone, iPad, Blackberry, and Android (with free Kindle App). If interested, please see the link on my profile!

Here's a short summary of OCEAN: Accused of a crime he didn't commit, fifteen-year-old Rayan Thorn, heir to an intergalactic shipping company, is fleeing justice. After taking refuge on a deadly stardust-mining vessel, he stumbles upon something unexpected: a Starmaid, a space-dwelling, mermaid-like creature whose capture is highly valued by the entire Andromeda Galaxy. Although at first determined to use the Starmaid Thallie as his ticket to freedom, Rayan finds that he's increasingly hesitant to expose her secret to the rest of the galaxy. After all, Thallie's the first and only real friend he's ever had. However, when someone kidnaps Thallie, will Rayan risk everything, including his freedom, to save her?

ALSO IMPORTANT!: I have a Facebook page, a Tumblr page, and a Twitter under *Serena Kay/Serena Kenobi*, so if you would like to follow me on any or all of those websites, please feel free to do so.

ALSO ALSO IMPORTANT: I am open for art commissions, and if you would like to commission me, or if you would like information, message me and/or check out my *Deviantart* profile by clicking on the link on my profile page here.

Note: This is IT, everyone! The final chapter. Wow, that's sad. But the sequel/trilogy is already all planned out, so if you guys are still interested, please let me know.

Background: The Empire has recently been established. Vader and Padme have never met before. Vader is several years older than she is.

Disclaimer: Don't own, never will.

Epilogue: Hello There

Padme awoke in a warm, comforting haze. She smiled, feeling truly at peace for the first time in her life, and curled up further into the covers. A strong arm tightened around her waist and stomach, and she suddenly remembered everything that had happened in the past day. She grinned and turned slowly around in Anakin's grip to face her new husband. He was sleeping,

albeit not looking quite as peaceful as she was, but as much as he could be under the circumstances. She traced his features, finally running her hand gently through his hair.

“Mmm...” He made a noise. “You can keep doing that,” he mumbled.

She pulled away. “I thought you were asleep!”

“Apparently not.” He opened his eyes and looked up at her, his gaze glowing dark and brilliant in the early morning light. She would never get tired of those eyes. His other hand came up, and his arm around her waist pulled her close to him as he kissed her slowly, longingly. He pulled away just long enough to mutter against her lips, “Love you, Smuggler.”

“Love you too, Pilot,” she breathed, and kissed him again, falling against him.

That afternoon, Padme heard the first word from Sabe and Jix. She was in the small sitting area of their hotel room, brushing up on the system and current economic status of Mandalore, when Anakin’s com buzzed. Seeing Anakin meditate, she jumped to get it, but he instead used the Force and called it to him. Padme huffed and placed her hands on her hips.

“I had that!”

His eyes opened, and he grinned. “Not quick enough, Smuggler.”

Padme rolled her eyes and returned to her seat. “You’re going to get it for that.”

“Looking forward to it.” As she whirled around, her cheeks flushed, he answered the call shortly: “Jix, report.” He smiled slowly at Padme, causing her to shake her head at him and bite back a grin.

“Jix here, Uncle D. So, listen, Sabe and I are hitched, and we’re going to find ourselves a small place in the city today. Want to meet up?”

“Yes,” said Anakin. ‘I need to make a trip to get some records, anyway. Meet me on Fourth Street and Seventh. Don’t be late.’ He started to hang up, but Padme suddenly lunged out of her chair and dived for it, shouting, “Don’t hang up, Anakin!” At the same time, Sabe yelled on the other line: “DON’T YOU DARE HANG UP, VADER!”

Anakin reluctantly handed the comlink to his wife, who was practically sitting in his lap by now, and pulled her closer to him. “Fine,” he grumbled.

Padme beamed at him and said, “Sabe, are you all right?”

“Fine, fine. Yes. What?” Sabe snapped to Jix. ‘Fine is good. I’m great. Bleeding wonderful. I’m serious! Don’t give me that look, mister!’ She growled and said back to the comlink, “Look, I’m going to need some stuff from the city. Want to go shopping? I only have Jix’s money, but it’ll have to do. And yes, I’m using your money. No, you can’t hold it back from me. I don’t have any money. Why? Because I need some other clothes! And food! Good Force, man, you’re driving me insane already. Well, deal with it. I’m your wife. Yes. Quiet, I’m talking to Padme. Padme? You still there?”

“Yes.” Padme shot Anakin an amused glance as he played with her curls. “I’m here. Look, let’s meet up in two hours? That good?” She shot a questioning glance to Anakin, who

nodded.

“Works for us. See you soon.”

Padme got up out of Anakin’s lap, tossed him back his comlink, and returned to her seat. “Anakin,” she said after a short pause, “I’m not sure this is the best planet to settle down. From what I’m reading here, it’s quite possible there will be a civil war soon. Apparently the Duchess is having trouble overseeing her more hostile subjects. It seems some want a return to their less diplomatic ways.”

“You admire her,” observed Anakin as he returned to his meditative position.

“Of course. She’s trying to keep her planet together when some want to rip it apart. She’s trying to maintain peace.”

“But at what cost?” questioned Anakin sharply. When she looked at him, puzzled, he added, “Mandalore is one of the outer-rim systems, so the Duchess doesn’t often visit the Senate. However, I’ve met her several times, and I’m not sure she knows fully what she’s doing.”

“How do you know?” Padme demanded, feeling the need to support this woman.

Anakin raised an eyebrow. “Bounty hunters are rampant here, Padme. And the Duchess Satine refuses to do anything but attempt to negotiate. She will not enforce more strict regulations.”

“You mean to control them?” Padme said, rising from her seat.

Anakin sighed shortly through his nose and closed his eyes. “Padme, listen to me. The only way you deal with bounty hunters is to kill them before they kill you. You don’t negotiate with men who can’t be reasoned with. Unless you’ve forgotten Boba Fett?”

Padme froze. No, of course she hadn’t. “He was Mandalorian,” she murmured.

“Yes. And he is only of many who share his idea of a good career. And the Duchess is so pacifist that it’s to the point where she isn’t protecting her own people anymore.”

“So what do we do?”

“We stay here. For the time being. I...” Anakin fell quiet, frowned. His eyes still closed, he inhaled sharply, every muscle tensing, as if ready to strike. Padme bolted from her chair but didn’t move towards him, afraid to break his meditation.

“Anakin?” she whispered. “What is it?”

A pause, then, “There’s someone here,” he said in a low voice.

“Here? In the apartment?”

“No. On Mandalore. Here, in the city. Someone... Force sensitive. Wait.” His fists clenched, and she could hear the sound of metal sliding against metal as his droid-like fingers closed into a fist. ‘He knows I’m here. He’s trying to connect. He’s trying to get inside my head,’ he hissed. “I can feel him... Force, he’s strong.”

“Is he a Sith?” Padme grew pale.

Anakin frowned again; then, to Padme's surprise, released his fists. "No," he said after a long pause. 'He's just curious. Guarded. He wants to know who I am. And what I'm doing here. He wonders if I'm a threat. He's... I don't know.' He slowly opened his eyes and rose to his feet. "I need to meet him."

"Do you think that's wise?"

He nodded. "We'll see who this is. If it's an enemy, I'll kill him." He shrugged on a shirt and added, "And he wouldn't know me, anyway. No mask."

But Padme wasn't so sure. She just had to trust him.

A couple hours later, the pair walked down one of the streets of the city. The sun shined through brightly, but both wore cloaks. Anakin's gaze swept his surroundings, making Padme somewhat nervous. What if they were ambushed? As they started down a main street, Anakin suddenly tensed and put his hand on Padme's arm. She froze, but he murmured, "No, it's all right. Look ahead." Padme looked up the street to where a young woman was walking, surrounded by several guards on either side. "It's the Duchess," Anakin told her.

"She's out in the open like that?" Padme admired this woman more and more.

"Yes, the foolish woman. She comes to visit her subjects, try to connect. It sounds like something you would do," he said, a fond note in his voice. He caressed her back slightly and urged her gently forward. "Come. Keep walking. There are too many people around for her to notice us."

However, despite the fact that they slipped closer to the edge of the street, the Duchess suddenly glanced at them and started towards them.

"Oh, no," Anakin muttered.

The Duchess came up to them, smiling. She was beautiful, and elegantly dressed. Padme's heart suddenly ached for her old life again. If she were still a Senator, she could have long talks with this woman, as an equal. They could make a difference... or at least try to. Anakin's hand pressing on her back brought her out of her wishful thinking, and he and she both bowed before the ruler of Mandalore.

"Please, rise," said the Duchess. Her voice was strong and light, almost song-like. "Good citizens, how are you faring? Is everything well?" She smiled at both of them.

"Fine, thank you, milady," Anakin said with a nod. "I..." He trailed off and suddenly shot a hard, keen look to a hooded man on the Duchess's right, only a couple of feet behind her.

The Duchess followed his gaze, and frowned, puzzled. "Is something wrong, sir?"

The hooded man stiffened and returned Anakin's gaze — his eyes a mix of bright blue, green, and shades of violet. Very discerning eyes, Padme thought, startled. But not threatening.

"Who is that man, if I may ask?" Anakin questioned.

The Duchess now looked even more confused, but answered, “Sir, he is one of my bodyguards.”

“He’s more than that,” Anakin said quietly. “He’s your husband.”

The Duchess’s eyes widened, and Padme glanced up at Anakin wildly, wondering what the blazes he was doing.

The man’s eyes narrowed, and he strode forward, saying sharply, “It’s *you*.” His hand went to his belt, behind his cloak. Oh, Force, Padme thought. He had a lightsaber. The man had a lightsaber. She couldn’t see it, but he reached for it the same way Anakin reached for his. There was no mistaking it.

Anakin’s eyes narrowed. “We need to talk. In private.”

The man studied him for a moment. “Very well.” He motioned to a nearby alley. “Over here. No one will hear us.”

“But —” The Duchess protested, reaching for him.

“It’ll be all right. You, stay here. Protect the Duchess,” the hooded man ordered the guards, who nodded. Then, the man nodded to Anakin warily. “Come.”

Anakin shot a glance to Padme and followed him. Padme stood there, watching him, and turned back to the Duchess. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over him.”

“If he hurts my husband,” the Duchess warned, “There will be consequences for you.”

Padme very much hoped that Darth Vader wouldn’t show his face today.

Anakin followed the man down the alley, until they were nearly at the dead end. The man turned around to face him and folded his arms over his chest.

“Who are you?” the man demanded sharply. “And how do you know the Force?”

Anakin knew this was his only chance. Making the first move of surrender, he pulled back his hood. “Because I was taught. A long time ago,” he said.

The man paused, then asked, looking slightly less threatened, “And what do you want?”

“I want to learn,” Anakin said.

“Learn?” said the man. “I sense something in you. Darkness. You’ve been taught much, but not what I have learned over the years.”

“I want to learn the other way,” Anakin said honestly. “I’ve been in the darkness too long. I want to know the light side of the Force. And I have a feeling that you might be able to teach me.”

The man was silent for a long moment, then slowly pulled back his hood, revealing a man about ten years older than Anakin. He had long-ish red-brown hair with grey streaks near his ears. His clothes were simple, practical, and unassuming. “You could sense that she loved

me,” he said. ‘I can sense that you are powerful. But raw.’ His eyes narrowed. “Untrained in many ways.”

“Perhaps. In the right areas I am,” Anakin admitted, albeit begrudgingly. “But I don’t think you’ve had complete training, either.”

“No,” the man said. “I haven’t. My master died when I was young. I’ve taught myself for many years. But I’ve never had a student.”

“Consider me your first.” Anakin stepped forward, realizing that with this act, he was finally leaving his old life and personality behind for the last time. This was it. No going back. If this man agreed to help him, Darth Vader would no longer exist. At least, for the most part. Only time would tell. But with this act, Anakin knew he was leaving his old master, the Emperor, behind.

Anakin held out a hand. “My name is Anakin Skywalker,” he said.

The man’s eyes softened slightly, and he slowly uncurled his arms and took the hand, shaking it once, firmly. “Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

THE END

It’s finally over! Wow, that makes me incredibly sad. But if you’re interested, there is a sequel! The story doesn’t end here.

Let me know if I should continue! :)

— **Serena**